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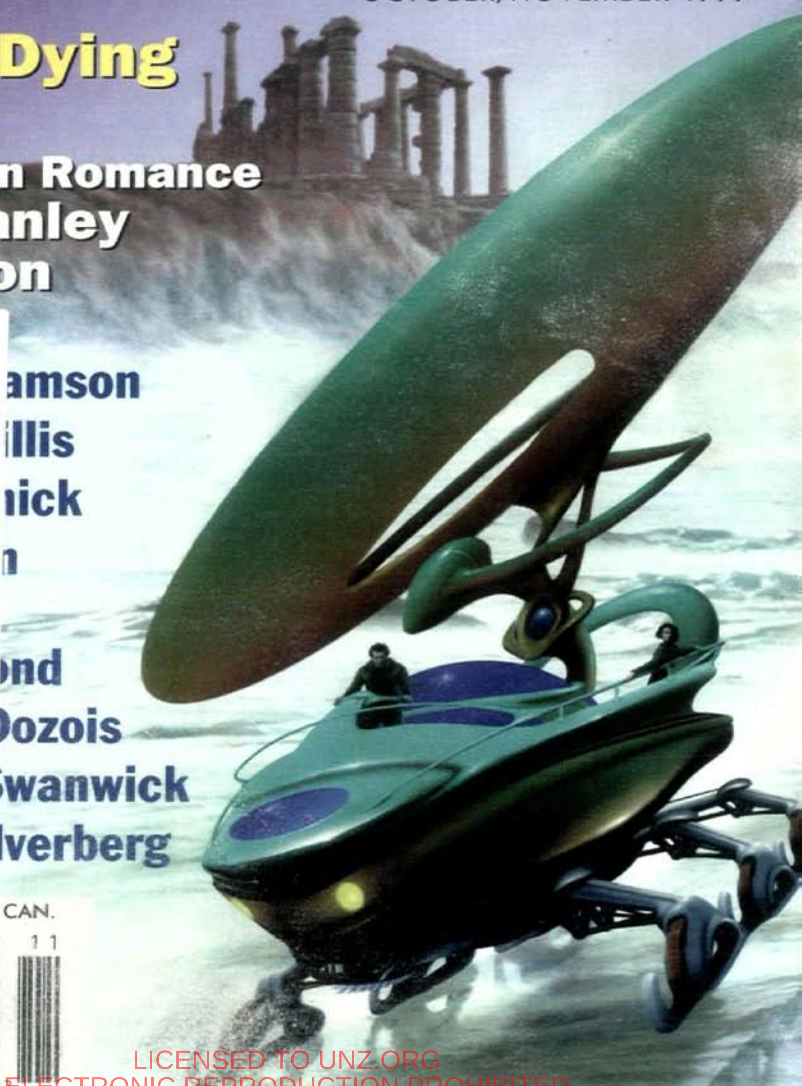

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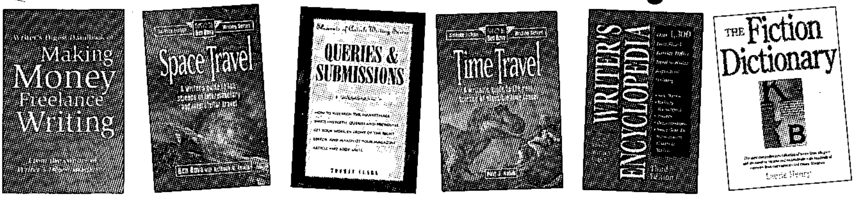
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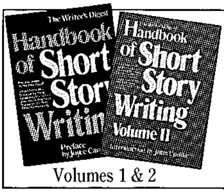
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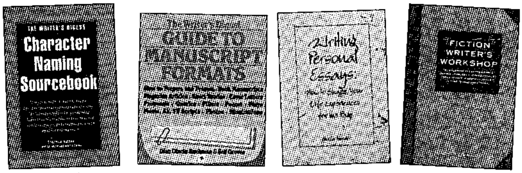
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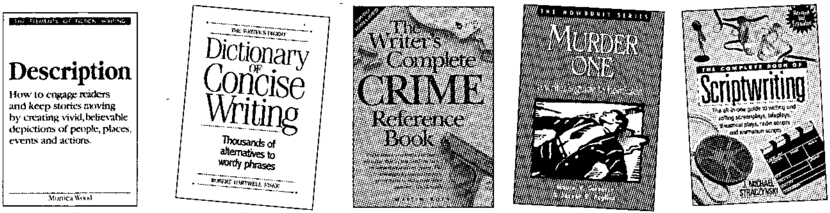
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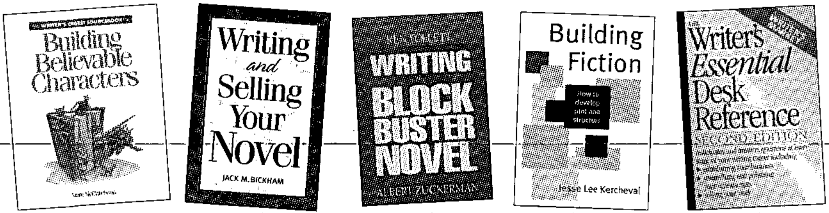
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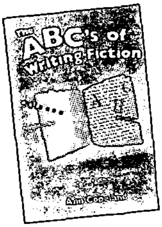
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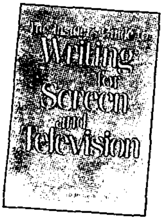
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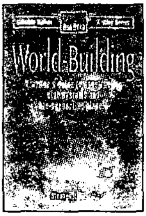
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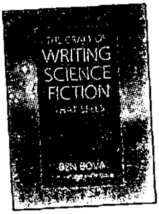
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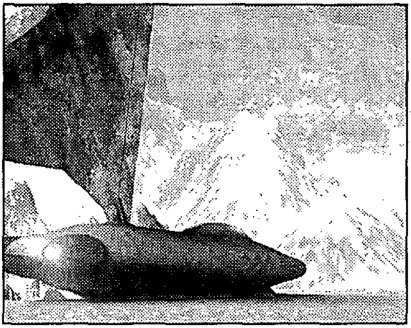

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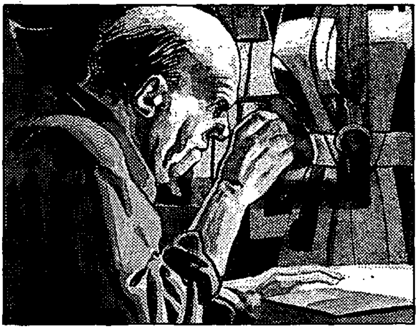

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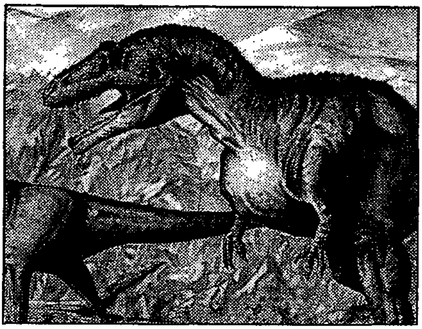

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

AUTOGRAPHS

I didn't write any stories last summer. I spent the time signing my name.

Something like seven thousand times, as a matter of fact. That's fourteen thousand words, which is practically a novella, though not a very interesting one. (Nobody I know would want to read a novella the text of which ran "Robert Silverberg Robert Silverberg Robert Silverberg Robert Silverberg" for forty or fifty pages.) Easton Press wanted me to sign fifty-five hundred copies of my novel *Dying Inside* for a leather-bound edition they were putting out, and then there were two hundred and fifty copies of the limited edition of my fantasy anthology *Legends* to do, and two hundred and fifty more for its SF companion, *Far Horizons,* and then I went to the Worldcon and signed a lot more books there, and so it went. Nice for the ego, nice for the bank account, very hard on the fingers and wrist.

I suppose I must have done a couple of hundred thousand signatures over the nearly fifty years of my career, maybe more. It's reached the point where I tell people that *unsigned* copies of some of my earlier books must be worth more than autographed ones. And yet the requests keep coming. I sign when asked. It's a small enough thing to do. (The only problem I have is when people ask me to inscribe a book: "Do it 'to Steve,'" they often say. I prefer to write "*for* Steve," not "*to*." It's such a subtle distinction that I don't entirely understand it myself.)

Oddly, although I'm a book collector, too, I've never had much interest in owning signed copies myself. Perhaps that indifference stems from the ease with which obtaining such things is available to me. I've frequently entertained other science fiction writers in my home, and vice versa. At the conventions, of course, I have ready access to droves of my colleagues. It would be no problem at all for me to haul out copies of their books and shove them at them. But I very rarely do. I'm not eager to carry a lot of books with me to a convention, and in any case it seems somehow out of character, in a way that I can't quite explain, for me to ask a fellow pro for his signature.

I've done it now and then, though, when it's seemed appropriate to do so. It's left me with a nice feeling every time, a pleasant memento of a writer I admire who is also a valued friend. But I once *signed* an autograph that changed my entire life.

That was in Houston, Texas, in April of 1981. I was the featured speaker at a convention taking place at a local university, and did a noontime signing for a long line of students. Midway through the whole proceeding a petite young lady who did not seem at all like a Texan college student asked me to sign a copy of my short story collection, *Capricorn Games*. Something about her caught my interest; we began talking; I asked her if she might happen to be free for dinner that night. She wasn't, but we exchanged addresses anyway and kept in touch. Karen Haber was her name. I married her six years later.

Karen isn't an autograph collector either. When I asked her why she had come across town during her lunch hour to get mine, she explained that her birthday was the same as that of the protagonist of my story "Capricorn Games." The coincidence had amused her, and, seeing in the local paper that I was going to be in town, she had brought the book along to be signed. Little dreaming, etc. . . .

My own autograph-collecting experiences, few and far between, have had less epochal consequences. But I cherish them all the same. As I mentioned a few months ago, when I was a fifteen-year-old fan I timidly asked famed editor John W. Campbell and veteran writer Will F. Jenkins to sign a copy of the March 1950 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction* at a small convention in New York City. I still own it. Just a few years later I would sit in John Campbell's office, a newly fledged professional writer, while Will Jenkins, at Campbell's request, helped me rewrite a story that hadn't quite hit the mark.

Decades later, at a time of stress and fatigue and general boredom with science fiction, I announced very publicly that I was retiring from writing forever. But I went on buying books, anyway. At a convention in Los Angeles in 1975—one of the first I attended after my retirement—I picked up an edition of Jack Williamson's *The Humanoids* that wasn't in my library. It's a book I have admired since I was a boy.

Jack Williamson, whom I've come to know very well, happened to be standing quite near me when I bought the book, and the opportunity seemed too good to pass up. So I turned impulsively to him and asked him to sign it, and he did—adding an inscription that made me blush at the time and which probably will enrich my estate by a thou-

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How I treasure that book! And how I sometimes wish I had done the same with other writer-friends of mine! Jack Williamson, who celebrated his ninetieth birthday last year, seems to intend to live forever. But Phil Dick, who surely would have scrawled something mad and unforgettable in a book had I only taken the trouble to ask him, is no longer available, nor Ted Sturgeon, nor Jim Blish, nor Fritz Leiber, nor Robert Heinlein. . . .

Actually I do have some signed Heinlein books, but I got them on one bounce, so to speak. Near the end of his life, Heinlein turned hundreds of his unwanted foreign editions over to Charles Brown of *Locus* magazine, and Charles got Heinlein to sign every last one of them. I saw them one day at the *Locus* office and came away with a copy of *Die Gruenen Huegel der Erde* and one of the Israeli edition of *Stranger in a Strange Land,* both neatly inscribed, "Robert A. Heinlein." Maybe I *am* an autograph collector after all, at least a collector of the autographs of my favorite writers, and don't fully realize it.

I have just one signed Asimov book, too; and thereby hangs a tale. The book is *The Gods Themselves.* Isaac dedicated it to me, and courteously sent me an inscribed copy. The problem was that there was something I found offensive in his Asimovianly exuberant dedication, and my annoyance led me to ask him to delete it from future editions of the book. Which he did, though somewhat surprised and more than a little miffed. Eventually we patched the matter up, of course; but I feel strange even now as I look at the signature he had so flamboyantly written, not at all foreseeing the ungrateful response the dedication would draw from me.

Another of my favorite writers was Alfred Bester, and at a convention in the mid-1970s where he was guest of honor I picked up Bester's new book, saw him practically at my elbow, and handed it to him to sign. "For Bob from the vice-president of his fan club—Alfie" is what he wrote on the title page. To my surprise, he also crossed out the printed line "by Alfred Bester" just above it, explaining that doing that is an old British tradition. Maybe so; but he didn't do it in a signed Bester book from 1957 that I later happened to buy, not even knowing it was signed, from an old-time collector who had decided to disperse his library.

(I once crossed out someone else's autograph, though. This was at some convention around 1980, when I was standing in the hotel lobby talking with Harlan Ellison and someone came up to us with a program booklet for us to sign. Harlan signed first, his big bold jagged signature; and when the booklet was offered to me, the Devil inspired me to draw a line through Harlan's autograph before I signed my own. It's unique and valuable, I suppose: the only Ellison autograph in the world deleted by Robert Silverberg.)

I suspect I would have asked Henry Kuttner, who for half a century has been a personal idol of mine among science fiction writers, to sign a book for me if I had ever met him. But he lived in California and I lived then in New York, and he died very young, in 1958, six months before my first trip west. I mentioned my admiration of Kuttner once to Julius Schwartz, the living legend, who once was Kuttner's literary agent (and H.P. Lovecraft's, and, I think, Edgar Allan Poe's), and Julie soon after sent me a Kuttner book from his own library that his friend Hank Kuttner had signed long before. (There was a second signature in the book—"Kat Kuttner"—better known to me as the fabulous C.L. Moore, Kuttner's wife and frequent collaborator.)

My collection of books, which is vast, is dotted here and there with dozens of other autographed volumes that I've acquired one way or another over the years. Christopher Priest put a nice couple of words in a book of his that I acquired at the Glasgow Worldcon. I missed out on buying one volume of Joe Haldeman's *Worlds* trilogy, and he sent me a copy with a lovely inscription in his splendid calligraphy. I replaced a copy of a Jack Vance book that I had lost in a fire, and the new copy had an autograph in it, which pleased me, because I admire Vance's work enormously and though he lives five minutes away from me I have never asked him to sign a book. And I have a number of books that writers have sent to me unsolicited, inscribed, out of recognition of some aspect of my own work that influenced some aspect of theirs: the finest form of flattery for a writer.

I know which one of all my autographed books I prize most highly, though.

About fifteen years ago my dear friend Jerry Mundis, who was staying with me as a house guest, whiled away the late hours of the night reading my copy of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*—the Modern Library paperback edition that I had owned in college in the 1950s. After Jerry left, I found the book lying on the library table, and before putting it back on the shelf I glanced idly through it. Jerry had playfully added one little touch of improvement on the inside front cover, an inscription that read:

"To Bob with respect and admiration—Herman."

A pity I don't have any grandchildren. I wonder what they'd have made of that one when they found it in my library. O

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GUEST EDITORIAL

by Jack Williamson

SURVIVAL, A BRIEF REFLECTION ON A LIFE IN SF

We are proud to present this editorial by one of SF's true Grand Masters.

My first story was published in 1928. My new novel, *The Silicon Dagger*, came out in April 1999. This longevity is perhaps my chief distinction. It has let me witness the whole history of American science fiction—American, as a genre with its name and its birth in the pulps, distinct from the classics of Mary Shelley and Jules Verne and H. G. Wells and Aldous Huxley and their heirs, published and accepted as mainstream literature. How well will it survive?

I see opinions that it is dead already, even declarations that science itself is over. I can't imagine the end of science, even with the proof of some new theory of everything. Though science fiction comes in many shapes to fit all its expanding schools of readers, fans, and scholars, I like to see it first as a response to the progress of science and the resulting avalanche of technological innovation and social change. It ought to go on as long as science and change propel it.

I count myself lucky to have been born in an era when that propulsion force was exploding. Einstein published his great equation in 1905, three years before my birth, but I recall an age when the atom was still a mystery, space flight a mad dream, our galaxy the entire universe, the term "science fiction" not yet invented.

My first few years were spent not far from the stone age, in a house with walls laid up from unshaped rocks, a dirt floor and a grass roof and bulls' hides hung for doors. It was on La Loba ranch high in the Sierra Madre of Mexico, a long day's ride beyond the end of any road for wheels, as my mother used to say. Mountain lions were killing the cattle, and she told me that I liked to share the dried venison jerky the lion hunters were feeding to their hounds. A time I've long forgotten.

We moved from Pecos, Texas, to New Mexico by covered wagon when I was seven, late homesteaders arriving after the choice land had all been claimed. Growing up between that fading geographic frontier and the new frontier of science-driven change, I was taught to read by my mother, taught to work by my father, drove the chuck wagon on a cattle drive when I was ten, had two years of college physics where the instructor never got to the few fascinating pages about radioactivity in the back of the texts. I'm happy that I've lived to invent the terms "terraforming" and "genetic engineering."

Science fiction itself has not been immune to change. I've seen it grow from a single pulp magazine and then dozens of them, disparaged by the elite as "subliterate nonsense" and more recently by the "sci-fi" label, grow to earn popularity in successful films and occasional best-selling books and even a reluctant acceptance into mainstream culture.

Hugo Gernsback published my first story as "scientifiction" before he lost control of *Amazing Stories* and had to invent a new name for the stuff. As editors came and went, I sold stories to Harry Bates, to T.

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Not that I can claim any record of unalloyed success for myself. Back in the 1930s, when Isaac Asimov was still a fan, he ranked me third in the field, after E. E. Smith and John W. Campbell, a position I have never recovered. There was a time when I thought the flood of change had ended my career. Campbell, in his "Golden Age" at *Astounding/ Analog* discovered a horde of such new writers as Asimov and Heinlein, many of them more able than me.

Yet I got on well with Campbell. He supplied the science for my "seetee" stories, the first fiction about antimatter. After the war, however, science fiction had a seismic shift. Involved in Dianetics, Campbell was no longer king of the ring. Another new generation of readers and writers had risen to welcome Horace Gold's *Galaxy* and Tony Boucher's *F&SF*, exciting new magazines that seemed so forbidding to me that I didn't even try to sell to them.

The visual media had begun draining readers and advertising revenue, a change that threatened the old domains of print but did offer me an unexpected, but only temporary refuge. When readers of the New York Sunday *News* began turning on the tube instead of spending their dimes for the millions of copies on display every week, the editors imagined that new comics might bribe them back. By an odd freak of fate, I was employed to write a new science fiction adventure strip, "Beyond Mars," which ran for three years before TV killed it.

A college drop-out, I went back to school when the strip was killed, earned my degrees, and spent nearly twenty years as a professor of English. More rewarding years, I think, than I might have had if the strip had lived on. I enjoyed colleagues and students, enjoyed reading and teaching great literature, enjoyed my first secure income. Fortunately, too, thanks largely to occasional collaborations with Jim Gunn and Frederik Pohl, I was able to stay alive in science fiction.

Retired from the full-time faculty since 1977, I'm happily still able to team-teach a course every spring with a good friend, Patrice Caldwell, and I've been happily surprised that the wells of imagination are not entirely dry. Though I no longer have to write for a living, it still gives me a reason for life.

Can my own survival be explained? Besides the genes and good fortune, I think some eighty years of effort have given me a fair command of story craftsmanship. I studied the pulps in their day, studied Shakespeare and the novel in graduate school, still read good fiction to look for what makes it good. Here at East New Mexico University I've taught Melville, Faulkner, Joyce, Ibsen, and the great Russians, taught language and linguistics, taught science fiction and creative writing. I've judged stories for the Writers of the Future contest, kept at the computer myself.

Back before the war, striving to stay alive at a penny a word or less, I used to scour the writers' magazines for some precious key to the slicks, which carried more cachet and paid many times as much. What I finally found is that no magic key exists. When I did begin to grasp Leo Margules's editorial formula for the "thrilling" pulps, it proved to be deadly.

The real secret is just a sense of what a story is and what it does. The short story, like the whodunit or regency romance, is simply another linguistic form, a high rung on the ladder that climbs from the phoneme and the morpheme and the word. The forms of fiction are units of language, still not quite at the top of the ladder, which can branch and branch again—in the pulps we had the western story and the ranch love story, the air-war story, the railroad story, the G-man story and the "spicy" story and a hundred more—each a ready instrument for whatever the writer had to say to his chosen audience.

At the top of the ladder, each of us is reading with our own perceptions, no two of us read the same story. We each share a private language—call it an idiolect—with every writer we like. A good editor gathers a circle of readers with common interests and the common language that lets them share them. James Joyce wrote Joycespeak for those who took the trouble to learn it. Stephen King writes King.

Language, of course, is what binds the talking ape into social humanity. Fred Pohl has said that we're selling ourselves, sharing our own lives and dreams, though often in the guise of fantasy. The arts of expression are essential for any writer, for us all, but only as the means for such human contacts.

A truth I took a long time to learn. As desperately as I tried to be a methodic professional turning out a commercial product tailored to fit the market, the method never really worked. The stories that did work came out of the moment, the idea and the feeling and the urge to share it, something that happens only when it happens.

I don't know how to make it happen. A story comes in a moment when it does—in moments rather rare to me—not complete but already something whole, shaped with some initial sense of a character in action and a problem to be solved, a sense of time and place and voice, driven by the urgent sense of something to be said and the sense of an audience to hear it. Novels come differently and more slowly, usually from some larger topic that concerns me and a narrative plan that can take months of incubation.

Beyond good genes and good luck and a bit of narrative craftsmanship, I think the chief secret of my own survival is an undying curiosity, the desire to know all I can about everything. In a world too vast to know, a time of change too fast to grasp, I try my best to learn and understand all I can. Most of what I write is born from some fresh interest, not from notes or journals. Each new story seems unique and I try to let it make its rules and shape itself. Though I have been guilty of two or three trilogies, they were never planned that way.

Language communicates experience. More exactly, the language of fiction should create in the reader the illusion of a new experience of his own, but whatever I write has to come out of my own life experience. It has no mystic source. I was the eldest sibling. We grew up on isolated farms and ranches, never with neighbor children I knew. I grew up pretty much alone, living in dreamlands. I learned to write my dreams.

I see my father as a frustrated pioneer, living in pursuit of a vanishing horizon. My own frontier beginning, I think, prepared me to enjoy the fabulous "sense of wonder." I grew up dazzled by marvels that are old hat now. Born to a world without plumbing, without electricity, without cars or telephones, in a cosmos where our galaxy was the whole universe, I was plunged into an age of change. The first car I saw was exciting, the first radio I heard, my first airplane ride.

I was enchanted by the old *Amazing Stories* when it came out in

1926, filled with the reprinted classics of Poe and Verne and Wells, A. Merritt and Edgar Rice Burroughs. The stories were liberating in a way I don't think any science fiction could be today when so many utopian dreams have become nightmares of nuclear or biological holocaust. My imagination turned on, I borrowed an old typewriter and set out to imagine the frontiers of science and time on my own.

Not that the business of science fiction is forecasting actual futures. When we do hit the mark, it is seldom by intention. The true function of serious hard science fiction is to survey the possible. In the early years, in spite of such astute critics of progress as Wells, pulp science fiction tended toward optimism. The dreams are often darker now, but visions of trouble to come can make the most engrossing science fiction.

The cosmic universe now promises to expand forever. Our frontiers of speculation should grow with it. Theories of everything are still only fascinating fiction. The impacts of genetic engineering and the information revolution give no hint of ceasing. Closer to home, the rising tides of change promise to sweep the publishing industry off its familiar foundations.

When the click of a switch can send copies of anything all over the world, copyright protection looks iffy. When paperless electronic books reach the market, contents to be sold over the Internet, and single-copy editions can be printed on demand, the bookseller is in danger. So is the commercial writer, when big publishers are eaten up by bigger publishers and midlist titles are canceled by accountants watching the bottom line.

Advances may dwindle. Markets for horror and multivolume fantasies may become more selective. Battles may be lost, but never the game. The electronic media, at least up to now, are ephemeral. Books promise to be more permanent, and with them the art of reading. Small book publishers and new magazines keep popping up, and I think most writers write for more than money. Stephen King is well worth every million, but I suspect that he would keep on enchanting us for half the pay.

Science fiction will certainly outlast me. I've had warnings enough that my own survival can't continue forever. Last year, after surgery for colon cancer, the oncologists gave me perhaps nine months to live. I'm happy to report that it was not as aggressive as they thought. I'm still here, under excellent medical care, with no signs of recurrence yet discovered, feeling better than I have for a year or so, happy to be alive.

These latter years have been kinder than I ever expected. I enjoy the continued ability to teach and work, to enjoy loyal family and good friends here in my home town and in the SF community all around the world. Portales is a quiet college town; I like its quiet life and a relative freedom from stress. Now, after all those early years of toiling for a cent or less a word, I have money enough, most of it not from writing or even teaching, but from the gradual appreciation of small investments in common stocks. Looking back for a moment, though I try to live for today and tomorrow, I feel that I've had a rich and rewarding life.

I've just bought a new computer with Windows 98, not from any actual need but because computers fascinate me. I keep on writing and teaching because they are what I am. With no dread of death or expectation of any hereafter, I try to keep my affairs in order. Reluctant as I am to leave all the dramas of a world in headlong transition, I'm pretty confident that I'll be gone in time to escape bad times if bad times come. I can't help listening for the bell, but I try to live as if it will never toll. O

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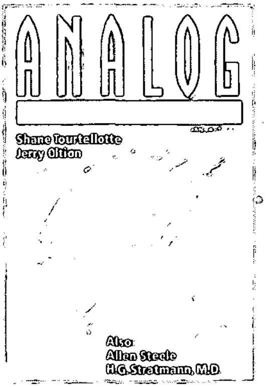
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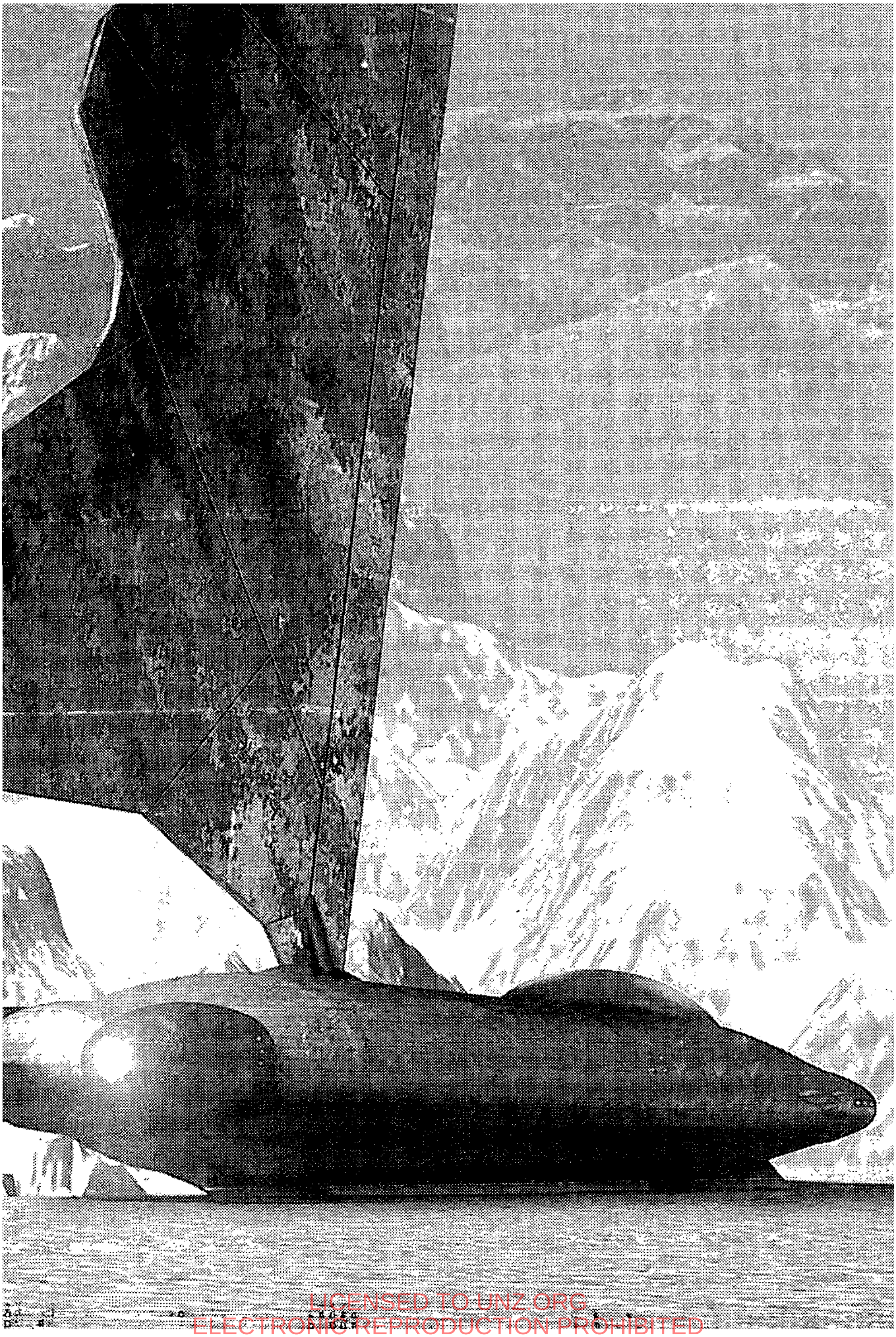
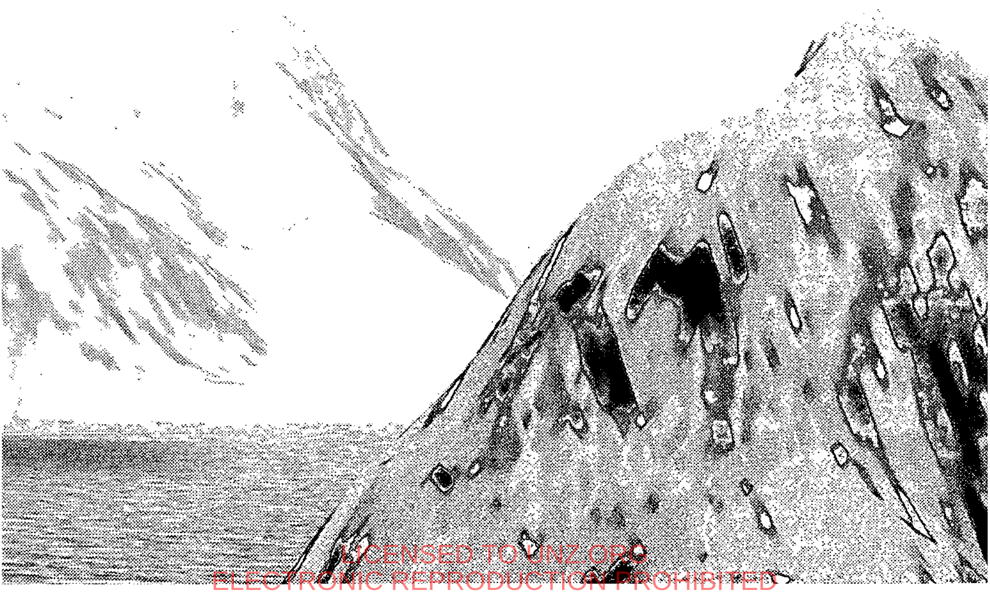


Kim Stanley Robinson

A MARTIAN ROMANCE

Our breath-taking cover story by multiple Hugo- and Nebula-award winner, Kim Stanley Robinson, is a bittersweet coda to the author's romance with the fourth planet. *Red Mars, Green Mars,* and *Blue Mars* have become white Mars. Although blue Mars has frozen, old friends, who were first introduced in "Green Mars" (*Asimov's*, September 1985), and vibrant new adventurers, embark on a voyage of discovery across an ice-swept Martian vista.

Illustration by Alan Giana



Eileen Monday hauls her backpack off the train's steps and watches the train glide down the piste and around the headland. Out the empty station and she's into the streets of Firewater, north Elysium. It's deserted and dark, a ghost town, everything shut down and boarded up, the residents moved out and moved on. The only signs of life come from the westernmost dock: a small globular cluster of yellow streetlights and lit windows, streaking the ice of the bay between her and it. She walks around the bay on the empty corniche, the sky all purple in the early dusk. Four days until the start of spring, but there will be no spring this year.

She steps into the steamy clangor of the hotel restaurant. Workers in the kitchen are passing full dishes through the broad open window to diners milling around the long tables in the dining room. They're mostly young, either iceboat sailors or the few people left in town. No doubt a few still coming out of the hills, out of habit. A wild-looking bunch. Eileen spots Hans and Arnold; they look like a pair of big puppets, discoursing to the crowd at the end of one table—elderly Pinocchios, eyes lost in wrinkles as they tell their lies and laugh at each other, and at the young behemoths passing around plates and devouring their pasta while still listening to the two. The old as entertainment. Not such a bad way to end up.

It isn't Roger's kind of thing, however, and indeed when Eileen looks around she sees him standing in the corner next to the jukebox, pretending to make selections but actually eating his meal right there. That's Roger for you. Eileen grins as she makes her way through the crowd to him.

"Hey," he says as he sees her, and gives her a quick hug with one arm.

She leans over and kisses his cheek. "You were right, it's not very hard to find this place."

"No." He glances at her. "I'm glad you decided to come."

"Oh, the work will always be there, I'm happy to get out. Bless you for thinking of it. Is everyone else already here?"

"Yeah, all but Frances and Stephan, who just called and said they'd be here soon. We can leave tomorrow."

"Great. Come sit down with the others, I want some food, and I want to say hi to everone."

Roger wrinkles his nose, gestures at the dense loud crowd. This solitary quality in him has been the cause of some long separations in their relationship, and so now Eileen shoves his arm and said "Yeah yeah, all these people. Such a crowded place, Elysium."

Roger grins crookedly. "That's why I like it."

"Oh of course. Far from the madding crowd."

"Still the English major I see."

"And you're still the canyon hermit," she says, laughing and pulling him toward the crowd; it is good to see him again, it has been three months. For many years now they have been a steady couple, Roger returning to their rooms in the co-op in Burroughs after every trip away; but his work is still in the back country, so they still spend quite a lot of time apart.

Just as they join Hans and Arnold, who are wrapping up their history of the world, Stephan and Frances come in the door, and they hold a cheery reunion over a late dinner. There's a lot of catching up to do; this many members of their Olympus Mons climb haven't been together in a long time. Hours after the other diners have gone upstairs to bed, or off to their homes, the little group of old ones sits at the end of one table talking. A bunch of antique insomniacs, Eileen thinks, none anxious to go to bed and toss and turn through the night. She finds herself the first to stand up and stretch and declare herself off. The other rise on cue, except for Roger and Arnold; they've done a lot of climbing together through the years, and Roger was a notorious insomniac even when young; now he sleeps very poorly indeed. And Arnold will talk for as long as anyone else is willing, or longer. "See you tomorrow," Arnold says to her. "Bright and early for the crossing of the Amazonian Sea!"

The next morning the iceboat runs over ice that is mostly white, but in some patches clear and transparent right down to the shallow seafloor. Other patches are the color of brick, with the texture of brick, and the boat's runners clatter over little dunes of gravel and dust. If they hit melt ponds the boat slows abruptly and shoots great wings of water to the sides. At the other side of these ponds the runners scritch again like ice skates as they accelerate back up to speed. Roger's iceboat is a scooter, he explains to them; not like the spidery skeletal thing that Eileen was expecting, having seen some of that kind down in Chryse—those Roger calls DNs. This is more like an ordinary boat, long, broad, and low, with several parallel runners nailed fore-and-aft to its hull. "Better over rough ice," Roger explains, "and it floats if you happen to hit water." The sail is like a big bird's wing extended over them, sail and mast all melded together into one object, shifting shape with every gust to catch as much wind as it can.

"What keeps us from tipping over?" Arnold asks, looking over the lee rail at the flashing ice just feet below him.

"Nothing." The deck is at a good cant, and Roger is grinning.

"Nothing?"

"The laws of physics."

"Come on."

"When the boat tips the sail catches less wind, both because it's tilted and because it reads the tilt, and reefs in. Also we have a lot of ballast. And there are weights in the deck that are held magnetically on the windward side. It's like having a heavy crew sitting on the windward rail."

"That's not nothing," Eileen protests. "That's three things."

"True. And we may still tip over. But if we do we can always get out and pull it back upright."

They sit in the cockpit and look up at the sail, or ahead at the ice. The iceboat's navigation steers them away from the rottenest patches, spotted from satellites, and so the automatic pilot changes their course frequently, and they shift around the cockpit when necessary. Floury patches slow them the most, and over these the boat sometimes decelerates pretty quickly, throwing the unprepared forward into the shoulder of the person sitting next to them. Eileen is banged into by Hans and Frances more than once; like her, they have never been on iceboats before, and their eyes are round at the speeds it achieves during strong gusts over smooth ice. Hans speculates that the sandy patches mark old pressure ridges, which stood like long stegosaur backs until the winds ablated them entirely away, leaving their load of sand and silt behind on the flattened ice. Roger nods. In truth the whole ocean surface is blowing away on the wind, with whatever sticks up going the fastest; and the ocean is now frozen to the bottom, so that no new pressure ridges are being raised. Soon the whole ocean will be as flat as a table top.

* * *

This first day out is clear, the royal blue sky crinkling in a gusty west wind. Under the clear dome of the cockpit it's warm, their air at a slightly higher pressure than outside. Sea level is now around 300 millibars, and lowering year by year, as if for a great storm that never quite comes. They skate at speed around the majestic promontory of the Phlegra Peninsula, its great prow topped by a white-pillared Doric temple. Staring up at it Eileen listens to Hans and Frances discuss the odd phenomenon of the Phlegra Montes, seaming the north coast of Elysium like a long ship capsized on the land; unusually straight for a Martian mountain range, as are the Erebus Montes to the west. As if they were not, like all the rest of the mountain ranges on Mars, the remnants of crater rims. Hans argues for them being two concentric rings of a really big impact basin, almost the size of the Big Hit itself but older than the Big Hit, and so mostly obliterated by the later impact, with only Isidis Bay and much of the Utopian and Elysian Seas left to indicate where the basin had been. "Then the ranges could have been somewhat straightened out in the deformation of the Elysium bulge."

Frances shakes her head, as always. Never once has Eileen seen the two of them agree. In this case Frances thinks the ranges may be even older than Hans does, remnants of early tectonic or proto-tectonic plate movement. There's a wide body of evidence for this early tectonic era, she claims, but Hans is shaking his head: "The andesite indicating tectonic action is younger than that. The Phlegras are early Noachian. A pre-Big Hit big hit."

Whatever the explanation, there the fine prow of rock stands, the end of a steep peninsula extending straight north into the ice for four hundred kilometers out of Firewater. A long sea cliff falling into the sea, and the same on the other side. The pilgrimage out the spine to the temple is one of the most famous walks on Mars; Eileen has made it a number of times since Roger first took her on it about forty years ago, sometimes with him, sometimes without. When they first came they looked out on a blue sea purled with whitecaps. Seldom since has it been free of ice.

He too is looking at the point, with an expression that makes Eileen think he might be remembering that time as well. Certainly he would remember if asked; his incredible memory has still not yet begun to weaken, and with the suite of memory drugs now available, drugs that have helped Eileen to remember quite a bit, it might well be that he will never forget anything his whole life long. Eileen envies that, though she knows he is ambivalent about it. But by now it is one of the things about him that she loves. He remembers everything and yet he has remained stalwart, even chipper, through all the years of the crash. A rock for her to lean on, in her own cycles of despair and mourning. Of course as a Red it could be argued he has no reason to mourn. But that wouldn't be true. His attitude was more complex than that, Eileen has seen it; so complex that she does not fully understand it. Some aspect of his strong memory, taking the long view; a determination to make it well; rueful joy in the enduring land; some mix of all these things. She watches him as he stares absorbed at the promontory where he and she once stood together over a living world.

How much he has meant to her through the years has become beyond her ability to express. Sometimes it fills her to overflowing. That they have known each other all their lives; that they have helped each other through hard times; that he got her out into the land in the first place, starting her on the trajectory of her whole life; all these would have made him a crucial figure to her. But everyone has many such figures. And over the years their divergent interests kept splitting them up; they could have lost touch entirely. But at one point Roger came to visit her in Burroughs, and she and her partner of that time had been growing distant for many years, and Roger said, I love you Eileen. I love you. Remember what it was like on Olympus Mons, when we climbed it? Well now I think the whole world is like that. The escarpment goes on forever. We just keep climbing it until eventually we fall off. And I want to climb it with you. We keep getting together and then going our ways, and it's too chancy, we might not cross paths again. Something might happen. I want more than that. I love you.

And so eventually they set up rooms in her co-op in Burroughs. She continued to work in the Ministry of the Environment, and he continued to guide treks in the back country, then to sail on the North Sea; but he always came back from his treks and his cruises, and she always came back from her working tours and her vacations away; and they lived together in their rooms when they were both at home, and became a real couple. And through the years without summer, then the little ice age and the crash itself, his steadfast presence has been all that has kept her from despair. She shudders to think what it would have been like to get through these years alone. To work so hard, and then to fail. . . . It's been hard. She has seen that he has worried about her. This trip is an expression of that: Look, he said once after she came home in tears over reports of the tropical and temperate extinctions—look, I think you need to get out there and see it. See the world the way it is now, see the ice. It's not so bad. There have been ice ages before. It's not so bad.

And as she had been more and more holing up in Burroughs, unable to face it, she finally was forced to agree that, in theory, it would be a good thing. Very soon after that he organized this trip. Now she sees that he gathered some of their friends from the Olympus Mons expedition to help entice her to come, perhaps; also, once here, to remind her of that time in their lives. Anyway it's nice to see their faces, flushed and grinning as they fly along.

Skate east! the wind says, and they skitter round Scrabster, the northeastern point of Elysium, then head south over the great plate of white ice inserted into the incurve of the coast. This is the Bay of Arcadia, and the steep rise of land backing the bluffs is called Acadia, for its supposed resemblance to Nova Scotia and the coast of Maine. Dark rock, battered by the dark north sea; sea-cliffs of bashed granite, sluiced by big breakers. Now, however, all still and white, with the ice that has powdered down out of the spray and spume flocking and frosting the beach and the cliffs until they look like wedding cake ramparts. No sign of life in Acadia; no greens anywhere in sight. This is not her Elysium.

Roger takes over the sailing from Arnold, and brings them around a point, and there suddenly is a steep-walled square island ahead, vivid green on top—ah. A township, frozen here near the entrance to a fjord, no doubt in a deep channel. All the townships have become islands in the ice. The greenery on top is protected by a tent which Eileen cannot see in the bright sun. "I'm just dropping by to pick up the rest of our crew," Roger explains. "A couple of young friends of mine are going to join us."

"Which one is this?" Stephan inquires.

"This is the *Altamira.*"

Roger sails them around in a sweet curve that ends with them stalled into the wind and skidding to a halt. He retracts the cockpit dome. "I don't intend to go up there, by the way, that's an all-day trip no matter how you do it. My friends should be down here on shore to meet us."

They step down onto the ice, which is mostly a dirty opaque white, cracked and a bit nobbled on the surface, so that it is slippery in some places, but mostly fairly steady underfoot; and Eileen sees that the treacherous spots stand out like windows inlaid in tile. Roger talks into his wristpad, then leads them into the fjord, which on one steep side displays a handsome granite staircase, frost lying like a fluffy carpet on the steps.

Up these stairs Roger climbs, putting his feet in earlier bootprints. Up on the headland over the fjord they have a good view over the ice to the township, which is really very big for a manufactured object, a kilometer on each side, and its deck only just lower than they are. Its square tented middle glows green like a Renaissance walled garden, the enchanted space of a fairy tale.

There is a little stone shelter or shrine on the headland, and they follow the sidewalk over to it. The wind chills Eileen's hands, toes, nose and ears. A big white plate, whistling in the wind. Elysium bulks behind them, its two volcanoes just sticking over the high horizon to the west. She holds Roger's hand as they approach. As always, her pleasure in Mars is mixed up with her pleasure in Roger; at the sight of this big cold panorama love sails through her like the wind. Now he is smiling, and she follows his gaze and sees two people though the shelter's open walls. "Here they are."

They round the front of the shrine and the pair notices them. "Hi, all," Roger says. "Eileen, this is Freya Ahmet and Jean-Claude Bayer. They're going to be joining us. Freya, Jean-Claude, this is Eileen Monday."

"We have heard of you," Freya says to her with a friendly smile. She and Jean-Claude are both huge; they tower over the old ones.

"That's Hans and Frances behind us, down the path there arguing. Get used to that."

Hans and Frances arrive, then Arnold and Stephan. Introductions are made all around, and they investigate the empty shrine or shelter, and exclaim over the view. The eastern side of the Elysian massif was a rain shadow before, and now it bulks just as black and empty as ever, looking much as it always has. The huge white plate of the sea, however, and the incongruous square of the *Altamira*; these are new and strange. Eileen has never seen anything like it. Impressive, yes; vast; sublime; but her eye always returns to the little tented greenhouse on the township, tiny stamp of life in a lifeless universe. She wants her world back.

On the way back down the stone stairs she looks at the exposed granite of the fjord's sidewall, and in one crack she sees black crumbly matter. She stops to inspect it.

"Look at this," she says to Roger, scraping away at rime to see more of it. "Is it lichen? Moss? Is it alive? It looks like it might be alive."

Roger sticks his face right down into it, eyes a centimeter away. "Moss, I think. Dead."

Eileen looks away, feeling her stomach sink. "I'm so tired of finding dead plants, dead animals. The last dozen times out I've not seen a single living thing. I mean winterkill is winterkill, but this is ridiculous. The whole world is dying!"

Roger waggles a hand uncertainly, straightens up. He can't really deny it. "I suppose there was never enough sunlight to begin with," he says, glancing up at their bronze button of light, slanting over Elysium. "People wanted it and so they did it anyway. But reality isn't interested in what people want."

Eileen sighs. "No." She pokes again at the black matter. "Are you sure this isn't a lichen? It's black, but it looks like it's still alive somehow."

He inspects some of it between his gloved fingers. Small black fronds, like a kind of tiny seaweed, frayed and falling apart.

"Fringe lichen?" Eileen ventures. "Frond lichen?"

"Moss, I think. Dead moss." He clears away more ice and snow. Black rock, rust rock. Black splotches. It's the same everywhere. "No doubt there are lichens alive, though. And Freya and Jean-Claude say the subnivean environment is quite lively still. Very robust. Protected from the elements."

Life under a permanent blanket of snow. "Uh huh."

"Hey. Better than nothing, right?"

"Right. But this moss here was exposed."

"Right. And therefore dead."

They start down again. Roger hikes beside her, lost in thought. He smiles: "I'm having a déjà vu. This happened before, right? A long time ago we found some little living thing together, only it was dead. It happened before!"

She shakes her head. "You tell me. You're the memory man."

"But I can't quite get it. It's more like déjà vu. Well, but maybe . . . maybe on that first trip, when we first met?" He gestures eastward—over the Amazonian Sea, she guesses, to the canyon country east of Olympus. "Some little snails or something."

"But could that be?" Eileen asks. "I thought we met when I was still in college. The terraforming had barely started then, right?"

"True." He frowns. "Well, there was lichen from the start, it was the first thing they propagated."

"But snails?"

He shrugs. "That's what I seem to remember. You don't?"

"No way. Just whatever you've told me since, you know."

"Oh well." He shrugs again, smile gone. "Maybe it was just a déjà vu."

Back in the ice boat's cockpit and cabin, they could be crowded around the kitchen table of a little apartment anywhere. The two newcomers, heads brushing the ceiling even though they are sitting on stools, cook for them. "No, please, that is why we are here," Jean-Claude says with a big grin. "I very much like to be cooking the big meals." Actually they're coming along to meet with some friends on the other side of the Amazonian Sea, all people Roger has worked with often in the last few years, to initial some research on the western slope of Olympus—glaciology and ecology, respectively.

After these explanations they listen with the rest as Hans and Frances argue about the crash for a while. Frances thinks it was caused by the rapid brightening of the planet's albedo when the North Sea was pumped out and froze; this the first knock in a whole series of positively reinforcing events leading in a negative direction, an autocatalytic drop into the death spiral of the full crash. Hans thinks it was the fact that the underground permafrost was never really thawed deeper than a few centimeters, so that the resulting extremely thin skin of the life zone looked much more well-established than it really was, and was actually very vulnerable to collapse if attacked by mutant bacteria, as Hans believes it was, the mutations spurred by the heavy incoming UV—

"You don't know that," Frances says. "You radiate those same organisms in the lab, or even expose them in space labs, and you don't get the mutations or the collapses we're seeing on the ground."

"Interaction with ground chemicals," Hans says. "Sometimes I think everything is simply getting salted to death."

Frances shakes her head. "These are different problems, and there's no sign of synergistic effects when they're combined. You're just listing possibilities, Hans, admit it. You're throwing them out there, but no one knows. The etiology is not understood."

This is true; Eileen has been working in Burroughs on the problem for ten years, and she knows Frances is right. The truth is that in planetary ecology, as in most other fields, ultimate causes are very hard to discern. Hans now waggles a hand, which is as close as he will come to conceding a point to Frances. "Well, when you have a list of possibilities as long as this one, you don't have to have synergy among them. Just a simple addition of factors might do it. Everything having its particular effect."

Eileen looks over at the youngsters, their backs to the old ones as they cook. They're debating salt too, but then she sees one put a handful of it in the rice.

In the fragrance of basmati steam they spoon out their meals. Freya and Jean-Claude eat seated on the floor. They listen to the old ones, but don't speak much. Occasionally they lean heads together to talk in private, under the talk at the little table. Eileen sees them kiss.

She smiles. She hasn't been around people this young for a long time. Then through their reflections in the cockpit dome she sees the ice outside, glowing under the stars. It's a disconcerting image. But they are not looking out the window. And if even they were, they are young, and so do not quite believe in death. They are blithe.

Roger sees her looking at the young giants, and shares with her a small smile at them. He is fond of them, she sees. They are his friends. When they say good-night and duck down the passageway to their tiny quarters in the bow, he kisses his fingers and pats them on the head as they pass him.

The old ones finish their meal, then sit staring out the window, sipping hot chocolate spiked with peppermint schnapps.

"We can regroup," Hans says, continuing the discussion with Frances. "If we pursued the heavy industrial methods aggressively, the ocean would melt from below and we'd be back in business."

Frances shakes her head, frowning. "Bombs in the regolith, you mean."

"Bombs *below* the regolith. So that we get the heat, but trap the radiation. That and some of the other methods might do it. A flying lens to focus some of the mirrors' light, heat the surface with focused sunlight. Then bring in some nitrogen from Titan. Direct a few comets to unpopulated areas, or aerobrake them so that they burn up in the atmosphere. That would thicken things up fast. And more halocarbon factories, we let that go too soon."

"It sounds pretty industrial," Frances says.

"Of course it is. Terraforming is an industrial process, at least partly. We forgot that."

"I don't know," Roger says. "Maybe it would be best to keep pursuing the biological methods. Just regroup, you know, and send another wave out there. It's longer, but, you know. Less violence to the landscape."

"Ecopoesis won't work," Hans says. "It doesn't trap enough heat in the biosphere." He gestures outside. "This is as far as ecopoesis will take you."

"Maybe for now," Roger says.

"Ah yes. You are unconcerned, of course. But I suppose you're happy about the crash anyway, eh? Being such a red?"

"Hey, come on," Roger says. "How could I be happy? I was a sailor."

"But you used to want the terraforming gone."

Roger waves a hand dismissively, glances at Eileen with a shy smile. "That was a long time ago. Besides the terraforming isn't gone now anyway," gesturing at the ice, "it's only sleeping."

"See," Arnold pounces, "you do want it gone."

"No I don't, I'm telling you."

"Then why are you so damn happy these days?"

"I'm not happy," Roger says, grinning happily, "I'm just not sad. I don't think the situation calls for sadness."

Arnold rolls his eyes at the others, enlisting them in his teasing. "The world freezes, and this is not a reason for sadness. I shudder to think what it would take for you!"

"It would take something sad!"

"But you're *not* a red, no of course not."

"I'm not!" Roger protests, grinning at their laughter, but serious as well. "I was a sailor, I tell you. Look, if the situation were as bad as you all are saying, then Freya and Jean-Claude would be worried too, right? But they're not. Ask them and you'll see."

"They are simply young," Hans says, echoing Eileen's thought. The others nod as well.

"That's right," Roger says. "And it's a short-term problem."

That gives them pause.

After a silence Stephan says, "What about you, Arnold? What would you do?"

"What, me? I have no idea. It's not for me to say, anyway. You know me. I don't like telling people what to do."

They wait in silence, sipping their hot chocolate.

"But you know, if you did just direct a couple of little comets right *into* the ocean. . . ."

Old friends, laughing at old friends just for being themselves. Eileen leans in against Roger, feeling better.

Next morning with a whoosh they are off east again, and in a few hours' sailing are out on the ice with no land visible, skating on the gusty wind with runners clattering or shussing or whining or blasting, depending on wind and ice consistencies. The day passes, and it begins to seem as if they are on an all-ice world, like Callisto or Europa. As the day ends they slide around into the wind and come to a halt, then get out and drive in some ice screws around the boat and tie it into the center of a web of lines. By sunset they are belayed, and Roger and Eileen go for a walk over the ice.

"A beautiful day's sail, wasn't it?" Roger asks.

"Yes, it was," Eileen says. But she cannot help thinking that they are out walking on the surface of their ocean. "What did you think about what Hans was saying last night, about taking another bash at it?"

"You hear a lot of people talking that way."

"But you?"

"Well, I don't know. I don't like a lot of the methods they talk about. But—" he shrugs. "What I like or don't like doesn't matter."

"Hmm." Underfoot the ice is white, with tiny broken air bubbles marring the surface, like minuscule crater rings. "And you say the youngsters aren't much interested either. But I can't see why not. You'd think they'd want terraforming to be working more than anyone."

"They think they have *lots* of time."

Eileen smiles at this. "They may be right."

"That's true, they may. But not us. I sometimes think we're sad not so much because of the crash as the quick decline." He looks at her, then down at the ice again. "We're two hundred and fifty years old, Eileen."

"Two hundred forty."

"Yeah yeah. But there's no one alive older than two-sixty."

"I know." Eilee remembers a time when a group of old ones were sitting around a big hotel restaurant table building card-houses, as there was no other card game all of them knew; they collaborated on one house of cards four stories high, and the structure was getting shaky indeed when someone said, "It's like my longevity treatments." And though they laughed, no one had the steadiness of hand to set the next card.

"Well. There you have it. If I were twenty I wouldn't worry about the crash either. Whereas for us it's very likely the last Mars we'll know. But, you know. In the end it doesn't matter what kind of Mars you like best. They're all better than nothing." He smiles crookedly at her, puts an arm around her shoulders and squeezes.

The next morning they wake in a fog, but there is a steady breeze as well, so after breakfast they unmoor and slide east with a light, slick sliding sound. Ice dust, pulverized snow, frozen mist—all flash past them.

Almost immediately after taking off, however, a call comes in on the radio phone. Roger picks up the handset, and Freya's voice comes in. "You left us behind."

"*What?* Shit! What the hell were you doing out of the boat?"

"We were down on the ice, fooling around."

"For Christ's sake, you two." Roger grins despite himself as he shakes his head. "And what, you're done now?"

"None of your business," Jean-Claude calls happily in the background.

"But you're ready to be picked up," Roger says.

"Yes, we are ready."

"Okay, well, shit. Just hold put there. It'll take a while to beat back up to you in this wind."

"That's all right. We have our warm clothes on, and a ground pad. We will wait for you."

"As if you have any choice!" Roger says, and puts the handset down.

He starts sailing in earnest. First he turns across the wind, then tacks up into it, and the boat suddenly shrieks like a banshee. The sail-mast is cupped tight. Roger shakes his head, impressed. You would have to shout to be heard over the wind now, but no one is saying anything; they're letting Roger concentrate on the sailing. The whiteness they are flying through is lit the same everywhere, they see nothing but the ice right under the cockpit, flying by. It is not the purest whiteout Eileen has ever been in, because of the wind and the ice under the lee rail, but it is pretty close; and after a while even the ends of the iceboat, even the ice under the lee rail, disappear into the cloud. They fly, vibrating with their flight, through a roaring white void; a strange kinetic experience, and Eileen finds herself trying to open her eyes farther, as if there might be another kind of sight inside her, waiting for moments like this to come into play.

Nothing doing. They are in a moving whiteout, that's all there is to it. Roger doesn't look pleased. He's staring down at their radar, and the rest of the instrumentation. In the old days pressure ridges would have made this kind of blind sailing very dangerous. Now there is nothing out there to run into.

Suddenly they are shoved forward, the roar gets louder, there is darkness below them. They are skating over a sandy patch. Then out of it and off again, shooting through bright whiteness. "Coming about," Roger says.

Eileen braces herself for the impact of their first tack, but then Roger says, "I'm going to wear about, folks." He brings the tiller in toward his knees and they career off downwind, turn, turn, then catch the wind on their opposite beam, the boat's hull tipping alarmingly to the other side. Booms below as the ballast weight shifts up to the windward rail, and then they are howling as before, but on the opposite tack. The whole operation has been felt and heard rather than seen; Roger even has his eyes closed for a while. Then a moment of relative calm, until the next wearing about. A backward loop at the end of each tack.

Roger points at the radar screen. "There they are, see?"

Arnold peers at the screen. "Sitting down, I take it."

Roger shakes his head. "They're still mostly over the horizon. That's their heads."

"You hope."

Roger is looking at the APS screen and frowning. He wears away again. "We'll have to come up on them slow. The radar only sees to the horizon, and even standing up it won't catch them farther than six k away, and we're going about a hundred fifty k an hour. So we'll have to do it by our APS positions."

Arnold whistles. Satellite navigation, to make a rendezvous in a whiteout. . . . "You could always," Arnold begins, then claps his hand over his mouth.

Roger grins at him. "It should be doable."

For a non-sailor like Eileen, it is a bit hard to believe. In fact all the blind vibration and rocking side to side have her feeling a bit dizzy, and Hans and Stephan and Frances look positively queasy. All five of them regard Roger, who looks at the APS screen and shifts the tiller minutely, then all of a sudden draws it in to his knees again. On the radar screen Freya and Jean-Claude appear as two glowing green columns. "Hey you guys," Roger says into the radio handset, "I'm closing on you, I'll come up from downwind, wave your arms and keep an eye out, I'll try to come up on your left side as slow as I can."

He pulls the tiller gently back and forth, watching the screens intently. They come so far up into the wind that the sail-mast spreads into a very taut French curve, and they lose way. Roger glances ahead of the boat, but still nothing there, just the pure white void, and he squints unhappily and tugs the tiller another centimeter closer to him. The sail is feathering now and has lost almost all its curve; it feels to Eileen as if they are barely making headway, and will soon stall and be thrown backward; and still no sign of them.

Then there they are just off the port bow, two angels floating through whiteness toward the still boat—or so for one illusory moment it appears. They leap over the rail onto the foredeck, and Roger uses the last momentum of the iceboat to wear away again, and in a matter of seconds they are flying east with the wind again, the howl greatly reduced.

By that sunset they are merely in a light mist. Next morning it is gone entirely, and the world has returned. The iceboat lies moored in the long shadow of Olympus Mons, hulking over the horizon to the east. A continent of a mountain, stretching as far as they can see to north and south; another world, another life.

They sail in toward the eastern shore of the Amazonian Sea, famous before the crash for its wild coastline. Now it shoots up from the ice white and bare, like a winter fairy tale: Gordii Waterfall, which fell a vertical kilometer off the coastal plateau directly into the sea, is now a great pillared icefall, with a great pile of ice shatter at its foot.

Past this landmark they skate into Lycus Sulci Bay, south of Acheron, where the land rises less precipitously, gentle hills above low sea bluffs, looking down on the ice bay. In the bay they slowly tack against the morning offshore breeze, until they come to rest against a floating dock, now somewhat askew in the press of ice, just off a beach. Roger ties off on this, and they gear up for a hike on the land. Freya and Jean-Claude carry their backpacks with them.

Out of the boat and onto the ice. *Scritch-scritch* over the ice to shore, everything strangely still; then across the frosty beach, and up a trail that leads to the top of the bluff. After that a gentler trail up the vast tilt of the coastal plateau. Here the trailmakers have laid flagstones that run sometimes ten in a row before the next low step up. In steeper sections it becomes more like a staircase, a great endless staircase, each flag fitted perfectly under the next one. Even rime-crusted as it is, Eileen finds the lapidary work extraordinarily beautiful. The quartzite flags are placed as tightly as Orkney drywall, and their surfaces are a mix of pale yellow and red, silver and gold, all in differing proportions for each flag, and alternating by dominant color as they rise. In short, a work of art.

Eileen follows the trail looking down at these flagstones, up and up, up and up, up some more. Above them the rising slope is white to the distant high horizon, beyond which black Olympus bulks like a massive world of its own.

The sun emerges over the volcano. Light blazes on the snow. As they hike farther up the quartzite trail it enters a forest. Or rather, the skeleton of a forest. Eileen hurries to catch up with Roger, feeling oppressed, even frightened. Freya and Jean-Claude are up ahead, their other companions far behind.

Roger leads her off the trail, through the trees. They are all dead. It was a forest of foxtail pine and bristlecone pine; but treeline has fallen to sea level at this latitude, and all these big old gnarled trees have perished. After that a sandstorm, or a series of sandstorms, have sandblasted away all the trees' needles, the small branches, and the bark itself, leaving behind only the bleached tree trunks and the biggest lower branches, twisting up like broken arms from writhing bodies. Wind has polished the spiraling grain of the trunks until it gleams in the morning light. Ice packs the cracks into the heartwood.

The trees are well-spaced, and they stroll between them, regarding some more closely, then moving on. Scattered here and there are little frozen ponds and tarns. It seems to Eileen like a great sculpture garden or workshop, in which some mighty Rodin has left scattered a thousand trials at a single idea, all beautiful, altogether forming a park of surreal majesty. And yet awful too; she feels it as a kind of stabbing pain in the chest; this is a cemetery. Dead trees flayed by the sandy wind; dead Mars, their hopes flensed by the cold. Red Mars, Mars the god of war, taking back its land with a frigid boreal blast. The sun glares off the icy ground, smeary light glazing the world. The bare wood glows orange.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Roger says.

Eileen shakes her head, looking down. She is bitterly cold, and the wind whistles through the broken branches and the grain of the wood. "It's dead, Roger."

"What's that?"

"'The darkness grew apace,'" she mutters, looking away from him. "'A cold wind began to blow in freshening gusts from the east.'"

"What's that you say?"

"*The Time Machine,*" she explains. "The end of the world. 'It would be hard to convey the stillness of it.'"

"Ah," Roger says, and puts her arm around her shoulders. "Still the English major." He smiles. "All these years pass and we're still just what we always were. You're an English major from the University of Mars."

"Yes." A gust seems to blow through her chest, as if the wind had suddenly struck her from an unexpected quarter. "But it's all over now, don't you see? It's all dead—"she gestures "—everything we tried to do!" A desolate plateau over an ice sea, a forest of dead trees; all their efforts gone to waste.

"Not so," Roger says, and points up the hill. Freya and Jean-Claude are wandering down through the dead forest, stopping to inspect certain trees, running their hands over the icy spiral grain of the wood, moving on to the next magnificent corpse.

Roger calls to them, and they approach together. Roger says under his breath to Eileen, "Now listen, Eileen, listen to what they say. Just watch them and listen."

The youngsters join them, shaking their heads and babbling at the sight of the broken-limbed forest. "It's so beautiful!" Freya says. "So pure!"

"Look," Roger interrupts, "don't you worry everything will all go away, just like this forest here? Mars become unlivable? Don't you believe in the crash?"

Startled, the two stare at him. Freya shakes her head like a dog shedding water. Jean-Claude points west, to the vast sheet of ice sea spread below them. "It never goes backward," he says, halting for words. "You see all that water out there, and the sun in the sky. And Mars, the most beautiful planet in the world."

"But the crash, Jean-Claude. The crash."

"We don't call it that. It is a long winter only. Things are living under the snow, waiting for the next spring."

"There hasn't been a spring in thirty years! You've never seen a spring in your life!"

"Spring is L-s zero, yes? Every year spring comes."

"Colder and colder."

"We will warm things up again."

"But it could take thousands of years!" Roger exclaims, enjoying the act of provocation. He sounds like all the people in Burroughs, Eileen thinks, like Eileen herself when she is feeling the despair of the crash.

"I don't care," Freya says.

"But that means you'll never see any change at all. Even with really long lives you'll never see it."

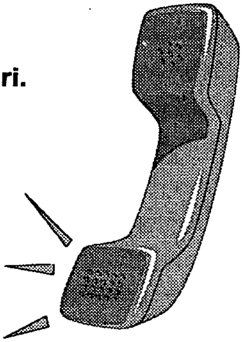
Jean-Claude shrugs. "It's the work that matters, not the end of work. Why be so focused on the end? All it means is you are over. Better to be in the middle of things, or at the beginning, when all the work remains to be done, and it could turn out any way."

"It could fail," Roger insists. "It could get colder, the atmosphere could freeze out, everything in the world could die like these trees here. Nothing left alive at all."

Freya turns her head away, put off by this. Jean-Claude sees her and for the first time he seems annoyed. They don't quite understand what Roger has been doing, and now they are tired of it. Jean-Claude gestures at the stark landscape: "Say what you like," he says. "Say it will all go crash, say everything alive now will die, say the planet will stay frozen for thousands of years—say the stars will fall from the sky! But there *will be* life on Mars." O

WHEN AN ALIEN IS INHABITING YOUR BODY

1. How to tell



You begin making long distance calls to somewhere in the vicinity of Alpha Centauri.

The alien on the cover of the National Enquirer looks familiar.

You no longer hate Barney.

2. What to do about it

Eat a lemon.

Play 400 Solitaire games in a row on your computer, until your carpal tunnel starts acting up.

Call Great-Aunt Ida, how's her sciatica?
is Cousin Sylvie getting a divorce from that plumber?
what does she think about the proposed cuts to Social Security;
hold the phone between your ear and shoulder.

Offer to watch your neighbor's daycare
while she runs to the store for milk.

Wash off all traces of sunscreen;
sit outside in a tank top for seven hours.

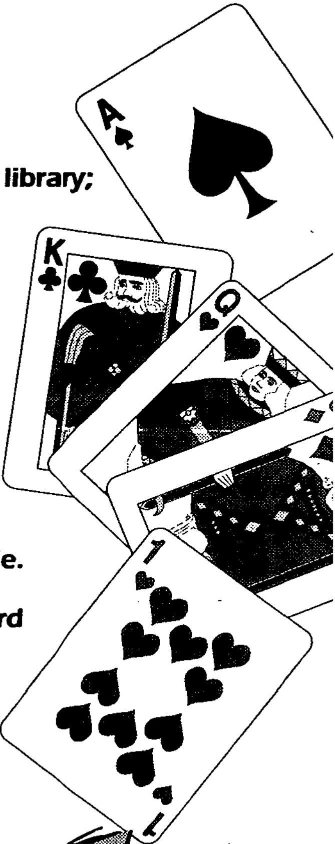
Borrow all the polka tapes from the public library;
listen over and over at high volume.

Buy a new pair of high heels,
half a size too small;
walk twenty-seven times around the mall.

Read The Bridges of Madison County.

Drink McDonald's coffee
without letting it cool.

> It won't be long before the alien
> gives up,
> slips into someone more comfortable.



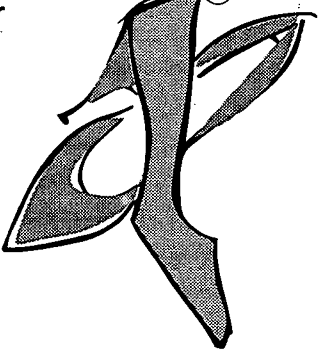
3. What to do afterward

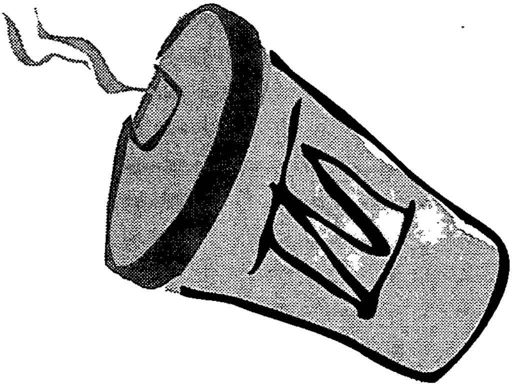
Slather yourself with aloe vera.

Take high heels back.

Sue McDonald's.

—Laurel Winter



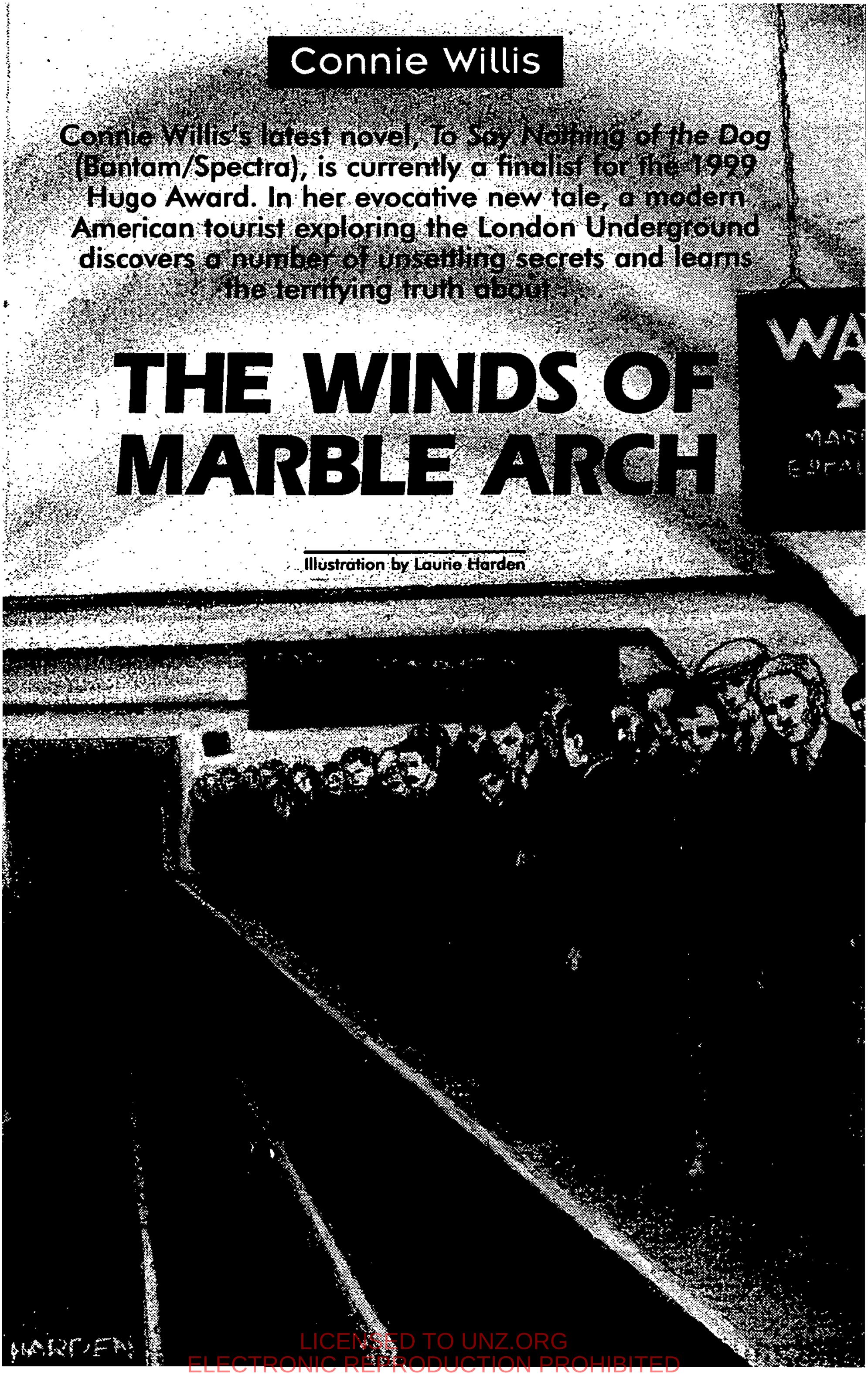


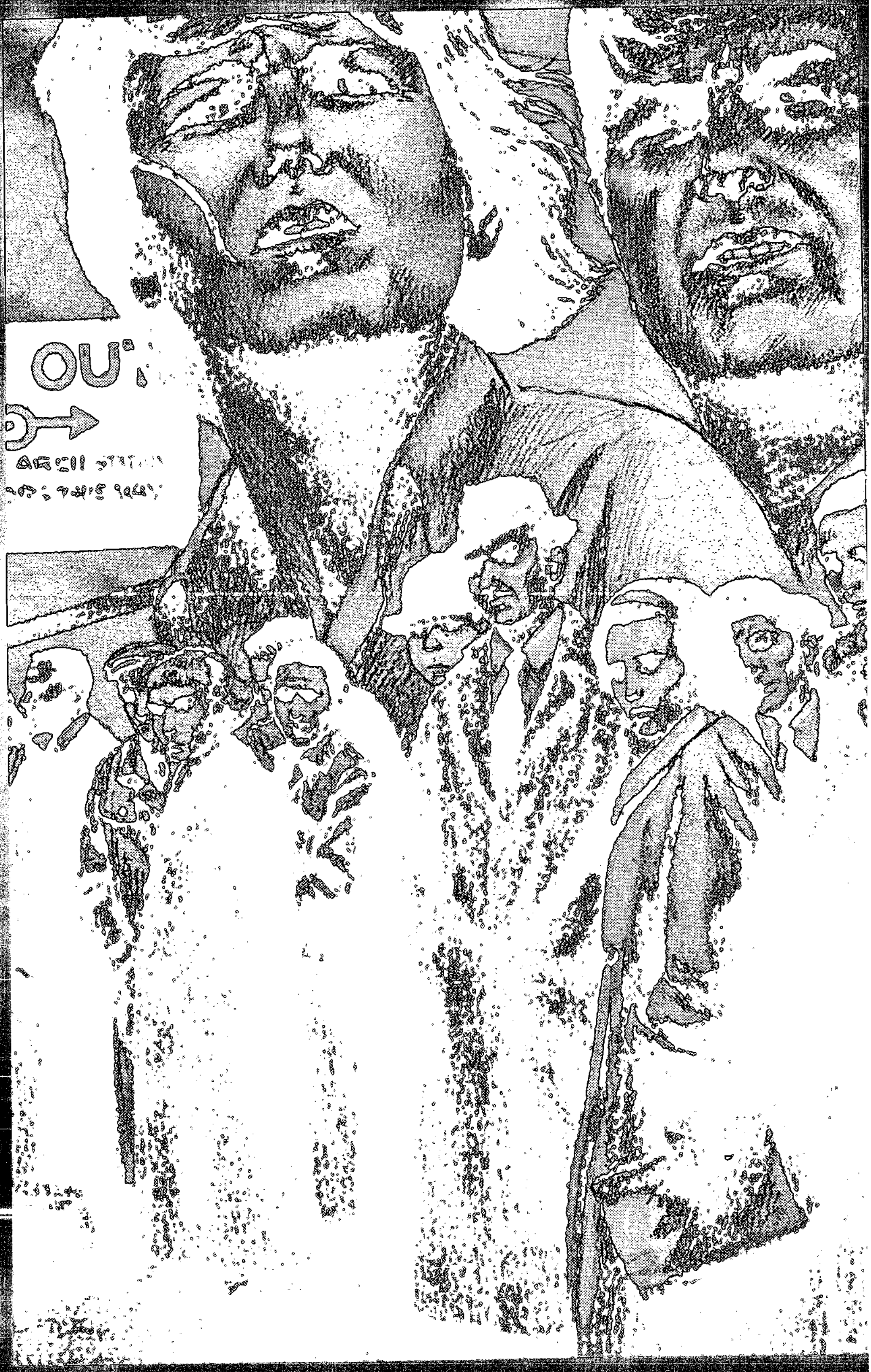
Connie Willis

Connie Willis's latest novel, *To Say Nothing of the Dog* (Bantam/Spectra), is currently a finalist for the 1999 Hugo Award. In her evocative new tale, a modern American tourist exploring the London Underground discovers a number of unsettling secrets and learns the terrifying truth about . . .

THE WINDS OF MARBLE ARCH

Illustration by Laurie Harden




OU

Cath refused to take the tube.

"You loved it the last time we were here," I said, rummaging through my suitcase for a tie.

"Correction. *You* loved it," she said, brushing her short hair. "*I* thought it was dirty and smelly and dangerous."

"You're thinking of the New York subway. This is the London Underground." The tie wasn't there. I unzipped the side pocket and jammed my hand down it. "You rode the tube the last time we were here."

"I also carried my suitcase up five flights of stairs at that awful bed and breakfast we stayed at. I have no intention of doing that either."

She wouldn't have to. The Connaught had a lift *and* a bellman.

"I *hated* the tube," she said. "I only took it because we couldn't afford taxis. And now we can."

We certainly could. We could also afford a hotel with carpet on the floor and a bathroom in our room instead of down the hall. A far cry from the—what was it called? It had had brown linoleum floors you hadn't wanted to walk on in your bare feet, and you had to put coins in a meter above the bathtub to get hot water.

"What was the name of that place we stayed at?" I asked Cath.

"I've repressed it," she said. "All I remember is that the tube station had the name of a cemetery."

"Marble Arch," I said, "and it wasn't named after a cemetery. It was named after the copy of the Roman arch of Constantine in Hyde Park."

"Well, it sounded like a cemetery."

"The Royal Hernia!" I said, suddenly remembering.

Cath grinned. "The Royal *Heritage*."

"The Royal Hernia of Marble Arch," I said. "We should go visit it, just for old times' sake."

"I doubt if it's still there," she said, putting on her earrings. "It's been twenty years."

"Of course it's still there," I said. "Scummy showers and all. Do you remember those narrow beds? They were just like coffins, only at least coffins have sides so you don't roll off." The tie wasn't there. I started taking shirts out of the suitcase and piling them on the bed. "These aren't much better. It makes you wonder how the British have managed to reproduce all these years."

"We seemed to manage all right," Cath said, putting on her shoes. "What time does the conference start?"

"Ten," I said, dumping socks and underwear onto the bed. "What time are you meeting Sara?"

"Nine-thirty," she said, looking at her watch. "Will you have time to pick up the tickets for the play?"

"Sure," I said. "The Old Man won't show up before eleven."

"Good," she said. "Sara and Elliott can only go Saturday. They've got something tomorrow night, and we've got dinner with Milford Hughes's widow and her sons Friday night. Is Arthur going with us to the play? Did you get in touch with him?"

"No, but I know the Old Man'll want to go. What are we seeing?" I asked, giving up on the tie.

"*Ragtime*, if we can get tickets. It's at the Adelphi. If not, try to get *The Tempest* or *Sunset Boulevard*, and if they're sold out, *Endgames*. Hayley Mills is in it."

"*Kismet* isn't playing?"

She grinned again. "*Kismet* isn't playing."

"Which tube stop does it say for the Adelphi?"

"Charing Cross," she said, consulting the map. "*Sunset Boulevard's* at the Old Vic, and *The Tempest's* at the Duke of York. On Shaftesbury Avenue. You could get the tickets through a ticket agent. It would be a lot faster than going to the theaters."

"Not on the tube, it won't," I said. "It's a snap to go anywhere. And ticket agents are for tourists."

She looked skeptical. "Get third row if you can, but not on the sides. And no farther back than the dress circle."

"Not the balcony?" I asked. The farthest, steepest seats had been all we could afford the first time we were here, so high up all you could see was the tops of the actors' heads. When we'd gone to *Kismet*, the Old Man had spent the entire time leaning forward to look down the well-endowed Lalume's Arabian costume through a pair of rental binoculars.

"*Not* the balcony," Cath said, sticking an umbrella and the guidebook in her bag. "Put it on the American Express, if they'll take it. If not, the Visa."

"Are you sure the third row's a good idea?" I said. "Remember, the Old Man nearly got us thrown out of the upper balcony the last time, and there wasn't even anybody else up there."

Cath stopped putting things in her bag. "Tom," she said, looking worried. "It's been twenty years, and you haven't seen Arthur in over five."

"And you think the Old Man will have grown up in the meantime?" I said. "Not a chance. This is the guy who got us thrown out of Graceland five years ago. He'll still be the same."

Cath looked like she was going to say something else, and then began putting stuff in her bag again. "What time is the cocktail party tonight?"

"Sherry party," I said. "They have sherry parties in this country. Six. I'll meet you back here, okay? Or is that enough time for you and Sara to buy out the town and catch up on—what is it?—three years' gossip?"

I'd seen Elliott and Sara last year in Atlanta and the year before that in Barcelona, but Cath hadn't come with me to either conference. "Where are you doing all this shopping?" I asked.

"Harrods," she said. "Remember the tea set I bought the first time we were here? I'm going to buy the matching china. And a scarf at Liberty's and a cashmere cardigan, all the things we couldn't afford last time." She looked at her watch again. "And I'd better get going. The traffic's going to be bad in this rain."

"The tube would be faster," I said. "And drier. You take the Piccadilly line to Knightsbridge, and you're right there. You don't even have to go outside. There's an entrance to Harrods right in the tube station."

"I am not maneuvering shopping bags up and down those awful escalators," she said. "They're broken half the time. Besides, there are rats."

"You saw *one* mouse in Piccadilly Circus *one* time, and it was down on the tracks," I said.

"It's been twenty years," she said, coming over to the bed and deftly pulling my tie out of the mess. "There are probably thousands of rats down there now." She kissed me on the cheek. "Good luck presenting your paper." She grabbed up an umbrella. "*You* take the tube," she said, going out the door. "You're the one who's crazy about it.

"I intend to," I called after her, but the lift had already closed.

* * *

In spite of Cath's dire predictions, the tube was exactly the same as it had been twenty years ago. Well, maybe not exactly. There were ticket machines now, and automated stiles that sucked up my five-day pass and spit it out to me again. And the escalators were metal now instead of wooden. But they were as steep as ever, and the posters for musicals and plays that lined them had hardly changed at all. *Kismet* and *Cats* had been playing then. Now it was *Showboat* and *Cats*.

Cath was right—I did love the tube. It's the best underground system in the world. Boston's T is old and decrepit, Tokyo's subway system is a sardine can, and Washington's looks like it was designed as a bomb shelter. The Metro's not bad, but it has the handicap of being in Paris. BART's in San Francisco, but it doesn't go anywhere.

The tube goes everywhere, all the way to Heathrow and Hampton Court and beyond, to obscure suburban stops like Cockfosters and Mudchute. There's a stop at every tourist attraction, and it's impossible to get lost.

But it isn't just an efficient way of getting from the Tower to Westminster Abbey to Buckingham Palace. It's a place in itself, a wonderful underground warren of tunnels and stairs and corridors, as colorful as the billboard-sized theater posters on the walls of the platforms, as the maps posted on every pillar and wall and forking of the tunnels.

I stopped in front of one, studying the crisscrossing green and blue and red lines. Charing Cross. I needed the gray line. What was that? Jubilee.

I followed the signs down a curving platform and out onto the eastbound platform.

A train was pulling out. An LED sign above the tracks said NEXT TRAIN 6 MIN. The train started into the narrow tunnel, and I waited for the blast of wind that would follow it, pushing the air in front of it as the train disappeared.

It came, smelling faintly of diesel and dust, ruffling the hair of the woman standing next to me, rippling her skirt. NEXT TRAIN 5 MIN., the sign said.

I filled the time by watching a pair of newlyweds holding hands and reading the posters on the tunnel walls for *Sunset Boulevard* and *Sliding Doors* and Harrods. "A Blast from the Past," the one on the end said. "Experience the London Blitz at the Imperial War Museum. Elephant and Castle Tube Station."

"Train approaching," a voice said from nowhere, and I stepped forward to the yellow line.

The familiar MIND THE GAP sign was still painted on the edge of the platform. Cath had always refused to stand anywhere near the edge. She had stood nervously against the tiled wall as if she expected the train to suddenly leap off the tracks and plow into us.

The train pulled in. Right on time, shining chrome and plastic, no gum on the floor, no unknown substances on the orange plush seats.

"I beg your pardon," the woman next to me said, shifting her shopping bag so I could sit down.

Even the people who rode the tube were more polite than people on any other subway. And better read. The man opposite me was reading Dickens's *Bleak House*.

The train slowed. "Regent's Park," the flat voice announced.

Regent's Park. The last time we were here, the Old Man had shouted "To the head!" and vaulted off the train at this station.

He had been taking us on a riotous tour of Sir Thomas More's body. We had gone to the Tower of London to see the Crown Jewels, and Cath, reading her Frommer's *England on $40 a Day* while we stood in line, had said, "Sir Thomas More is buried in the church here. You know, *A Man for All Seasons*," and we had all trooped over to see his grave.

"Want to see the rest of him?" the Old Man had said.

"The rest of him?" Sara had asked.

"Only his body's buried there," the Old Man had said. "You need to see his head!" and had led us off to London Bridge, where More's head had been stuck on a pike and the Chelsea garden where his daughter Margaret had buried it after she took it down, and then off to Canterbury, with the Old Man turned around and talking to us as he drove, to the small church where the head was buried now.

"Thomas More's Remains: The World Tour," he had said, driving us back at breakneck speed.

"Except for Lake Havasu," Elliott had said. "Isn't that where the original London Bridge is?" And when the annual conference was in San Diego, the Old Man had roared up in a rental car and highjacked us all to Arizona to see it.

I couldn't wait to see him. There was no telling what wild sightseeing he had in mind this time. This was, after all, the man who had gotten us thrown out of Alcatraz.

He hadn't been at the last four conferences—he'd been off in Nepal for the first one and finishing a book the last three—and I was eager to hear what he'd been up to.

"Oxford Circus," the flat voice said. Two more stops to Charing Cross.

I leaned out to look at the station as we stopped. Each station has its own distinctive design, its own identifying color: St. Pancras green edged with navy, Euston Square black and orange, Bond Street red. Oxford Circus had a blue chutes and ladders design that was new since the first time we'd been here.

The train pulled out, picked up speed. I would be there in five minutes and to the Adelphi in ten, a lot faster than Cath in her taxi, and at least as comfortable.

I was there in eight, up the escalators and out in the rain, up the Strand to the Adelphi in twenty. It would have been fifteen, but I had to wait ten (huddled under an awning and wishing I'd taken Cath's advice about an umbrella) to cross the Strand. Black London taxis, bumper to bumper, and double-decker buses, and minis, all going nowhere fast.

Ragtime was sold out. I got a theater map from the rack in the lobby and looked to see where the Duke of York was. It was over on Shaftesbury, with the nearest tube stop Leicester Square. I went back to Charing Cross, and went down the escalator and into the passage that led to the Northern Line. I still had half an hour, which would be cutting it close, but not impossible.

I started down the left-hand tunnel toward the trains, keeping pace with the crowd, straining to hear the rumble of a train pulling in over the muffled din of voices, the crisp clatter of high heels.

People began to walk faster. The high heels beat a quicker tattoo. I got the tube map out of my back pocket. I could take the Piccadilly Line to South Kensington and change to the District and—

The wind hit me like the blast from an explosion. I reeled back, nearly losing my balance. My head snapped back sharply like I'd been punched in the jaw. I groped wildly for the tiled wall.

"The IRA's blown up a train!" I thought.

But there was no sound accompanying the sudden blast of searing air, only a dank, horrible smell.

Sarin gas, I thought, and reflexively put my hand over my nose and mouth, but I could still smell it. Sulfur and a wet earthy smell, and something else. Gunpowder? Dynamite? I sniffed at the air, trying to identify it.

But whatever it was, it was already over. The wind had stopped as abruptly as it had hit me, and so had the smell. Not even a trace of it lingered in the dry, stuffy air.

And it must not have been an explosion, or poison gas, because no one else had even slackened their steps. The sound of high heels retained their brisk, even clatter down the tiled passage. Two German teenagers with backpacks hurried past, giggling, and a businessman in a gray topcoat, the *Times* tucked under his arm, and a young woman in floppy sandals, all of them oblivious.

Hadn't any of them felt it? Or was it a usual occurrence in Charing Cross Station and they were used to it?

How could anybody possibly get used to a blast like that? They must not have felt it.

Had *I* felt it?

It was like an earthquake back home in California, a jolt, and then before you could even register it, it was over, and you weren't sure it had really happened. The only way you could tell for sure was by asking Cath or the kids, "Did you feel that?" or by the picture tilted on the wall.

The only pictures on the walls down here were pasted on, and the German students, the businessman had already told me the answer to "Did you feel that?"

But I felt it, I thought, and tried to reconstruct it.

Heat, and the sharp tang of sulfur and wet dirt. But that wasn't what had made me lose my balance, what had sent me staggering against the wall. It was the smell of panic and people screaming, of a bomb going off.

But it couldn't be a bomb. The IRA was in peace negotiations with the British, there hadn't been an incident for over a year, and bombs didn't stop in mid-blast. There had been bombs in the tube before—the mechanical voice would be saying, "Please exit up the escalator immediately," not "Mind the gap."

But if it wasn't a bomb, what was it? And where had it come from? I looked up at the roof of the passage, but there wasn't a grate or a vent, no water pipes running along the ceiling. I walked along the tunnel, sniffing the air, but there were only the usual smells—dust and damp wool and cigarette smoke, and, where the passage went up a short flight of stairs, a strong smell of oil.

A train rumbled in somewhere down the passage. The train. There had been one pulling in when the smell hit. The train must be causing the wind somehow. I went out onto the platform and stood there looking down the tunnel, half-hoping, half-dreading it would happen again.

The train pulled in and stopped, and a handful of people got off. "Mind the gap!" the computerized voice said. The doors whooshed shut, and the train pulled out. A wind picked up the scraps of paper on the track and whirled them into the side walls, and I braced myself, my feet apart, but it was just an ordinary breeze, smelling of nothing in particular.

I went back out into the passage and examined the walls for doors, felt along the tiles for drafts, stood in the same place as before, waiting for another train to come in.

But there was nothing, and I was in the way. People going around me murmured, "Sorry," over and over, which I have never been able to get used to, even though I know it's merely the British equivalent of "excuse me." It still sounded like they were apologizing, when I was the one blocking traffic. And I needed to get to the conference.

And whatever had caused the wind, it was probably just a fluke. The passages connecting the trains and the different lines and levels were like a rabbit warren. The wind could have come from anywhere. Maybe somebody on the Jubilee Line had been transporting a carton of rotten eggs. Or blood samples. Or both.

I went up to the Northern Line, caught a train that had just pulled in, and made it to the conference in time for the eleven o'clock session, but the episode must have unnerved me more than I'd admitted to myself. Standing in the lobby and pinning on my registration badge, the outside door opened, letting in a blast of air.

I flinched away from it, and then stood there, staring blindly at the door, until the woman at the registration table asked, "Are you all right?"

I nodded. "Have the Old Man or Elliott Templeton registered yet?"

"An old man?" the woman said, bewilderedly.

"Not *an* old man, *the* Old Man," I said impatiently. "Arthur Birdsall."

"The morning session's already started," she said, looking through the ranked badges. "Have you looked in the ballroom?"

The Old Man had never attended a session in his life.

"Mr. Templeton's here," she said, still looking. "No, Mr. Birdsall hasn't registered yet."

"Daniel Drecker's here," Marjorie O'Donnell said, descending on me. "You heard about his daughter, didn't you?"

"No," I said, scanning the room for Elliott.

"She's in an institution," she said. "Schizophrenia."

I wondered if she was telling me this because she thought I was acting unbalanced, too, but she added, "So, for heaven's sake, don't ask him about her. And don't ask Peter Jamieson if Leslie's here. They're separated."

"I won't," I said and escaped to the first session. Elliott wasn't in the audience, or at lunch. I sat down next to Jim McCord, who lived in London, and said, without preamble, "I was in the tube this morning."

"Wretched, isn't it?" McCord said. "And *so* expensive. What's a day pass now? Two pounds fifty?"

"While I was in Charing Cross Station, there was this strange wind."

McCord nodded knowingly. "The trains cause them. When they pull out of a station, they push the air in front of them," he said, illustrating the pushing with his hands, "and because they fill the tunnel, it creates a slight vacuum in the train's wake, and air rushes in behind to fill the vacuum, and it creates a wind. The same thing happens in reverse as trains pull into the station."

"I know," I said impatiently. "But this one was like an explosion, and it smelled—"

"It's all the dirt down there. And the beggars. They sleep in the passages, you know. Some of them even urinate on the walls. I'm afraid the Underground's deteriorated considerably in the past few years."

"Everything in London has," the woman across the table said. "Did you know there's a Disney Store in Regent Street?"

"And a Gap," McCord said.

"Mind the Gap," I said, but they were off on the subject of the Decline and Fall of London. I said I needed to go look for Elliott.

He was nowhere to be found. The afternoon session was starting. I sat down next to John and Irene Watson.

"You haven't seen Arthur Birdsall or Elliott Templeton, have you?" I said, scanning the ballroom.

"Elliott was here before the morning session," John said. "Stewart's here."

Irene leaned across John. "You heard about his surgery, didn't you? Colon cancer."

"The doctors say they got it all," John said.

"I hate coming to these things anymore," Irene said, leaning confidingly across John again. "Everybody's either gotten old or sick or divorced. You heard Hari Srinivasau died, didn't you? Heart attack."

"I see somebody over there I need to talk to," I said. "I'll be right back." I started up the aisle.

And ran straight into Stewart.

"Tom!" he said, "How have you been?"

"How have *you* been?" I said. "I heard you've been ill."

"I'm fine. The doctors tell me they caught it in time, that they got it all," he said. "It isn't so much the cancer coming back that worries me as knowing that this is the kind of thing in store for us as we get older. You heard about Paul Wurman?"

"No," I said. "Look, I have to go make a phone call before the session starts." And before he could fill me in on the Decline and Fall of Everybody.

I took off for the lobby. "Where have you been?" Elliott said, clapping a hand on my shoulder. "I've been looking all over for you."

"Where have *I* been?" I said, like a shipwreck victim who'd been on a raft for days. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you," I said, looking happily at him. He looked just the same as ever, tall, in shape, his hairline not even receding. "Everyone else is falling apart."

"Including you," he said, grinning. "You look like you need a drink."

"Is the Old Man with you?" I asked, looking around for him.

"No," he said. "Do you have any notion where the bar is in this place?"

"In there," I pointed.

"Lead the way," he said. "I've got all sorts of things to tell you. I've just talked Evers and Associates into a new project. I'll tell you all about it over a couple of pints."

He did, and then told me about what he and Sara had been doing since the last conference.

"I thought the Old Man would be here today," I said. "He'll be here tonight, though?"

"I think so," Elliott said. "Or tomorrow."

"He's all right, isn't he?" I said, looking across the bar to where Stewart stood talking. "He's not sick or anything?"

"I don't think so," Elliott said, looking reassuringly surprised. "He lives in Cambridge now, you know. Sara and I won't be there tonight. Evers and Associates are taking us out to dinner to celebrate. We'll stop by for a few minutes on our way, though. Sara insisted. She wants to see you. She's been so excited about your visit. She's talked of nothing else for weeks. She couldn't wait to go shopping with Cath." He went over to the bar and got us two more pints. "Speaking of which, Sara said I'm to tell you we're definitely on for the play and supper Saturday. What are we going to see? Please tell me it's not *Sunset Boulevard.*"

"Oh, my God!" I said. "It's not anything. I forgot to get the tickets." I glanced hastily at my watch. It was 3:45. "Do you think the box offices will be open now?"

He nodded.

"Good." I snatched up my coat and started for the lobby.

"And not *Cats!*" Elliott called after me.

I would be lucky if I got anything, I thought, sprinting down to the tube station and pushing my way through the turnstile, including a train at this hour. The escalators were so jammed I had trouble getting the list of theaters out of my pocket. *The Tempest* was at the Duke of York. Leicester Square. I pulled my tube map out—Piccadilly Line. The passage to the Piccadilly Line was even more crowded than the escalator, and slower. The elderly woman ahead of me, in a gray headscarf and an ancient brown coat, was shuffling at a snail's pace, clutching her coat collar to her throat with a blue-veined hand, her head down and her body hunched forward as if she were struggling against a hurricane.

I tried to get around her, but the way was blocked by more teenagers with backpacks, Spanish this time, walking four abreast and discussing "El Tour de Londres."

I missed the train and had to wait for the next one, checking the "Next train 4 Min." sign every fifteen seconds and listening to the American couple behind me bitterly arguing.

"I *told* you it started at four," the woman said. "Now we'll be late."

"Who was the one who had to take one more picture?" the man said. "You've already taken five hundred pictures, but, oh, no, you had to take one more."

"I wanted to have something to remember our vacation by," she said bitterly. "Our happy, happy vacation."

The train came in, and I mashed my way on and grabbed a pole, and then stood there, squashed, reading my list. The Wyndham was near Leicester Square, too. What was at the Wyndham? *Cats.*

No good. But *Death of a Salesman* was at the Prince Edward, which was only a few blocks over. And there was a whole row of theaters on Shaftesbury.

"Leicester Square," the automated voice said, and I forced my way off the train, down the passage, and up the escalators and into Leicester Square.

The traffic up top was even worse, and it took me nearly twenty minutes to get to the Duke of York, only to find that its box office was closed until six. The Prince Edward was open, but it only had two sets of single seats fifteen rows apart for *Death of a Salesman.* "The soonest I can get you five seats all together," the black-lipsticked girl said, tapping keys on a computer, "is March fifteenth."

The Ides of March, I thought. How fitting, since Cath would kill me if I came home without the tickets.

"Where's the nearest ticket agent?" I asked the girl.

"There's one on Cannon Street," she said vaguely.

Cannon Street. That was the name of a tube station. I consulted my tube map. District and Circle Line. I could take the Northern Line down to Embankment and catch the District and Circle from there.

I looked at my watch. It was already four-thirty. We were supposed to be at the sherry party at six. I would be cutting it close. I sprinted back to Leicester Square, down to the Northern Line, and onto a train. It was even more jammed, but everyone was still polite. They held their books above the fray and continued to read in spite of the crush. *Madame Bovary* and Geoffrey Ryman's *253* and Charles Williams's *Descent into Hell.*

"Cannon Street," the computer voice said, and I pushed my way off and headed for the exit.

I was halfway down the passage when it hit again, the same violent blast as before, the same smell.

No, not the same, I thought, regaining my footing, watching unconcerned commuters walk past. There had been the same sharp smell of sulfur and explosives, but no musty wetness. And this time there was the smell of smoke.

But no fire alarms had gone off, no sprinkler system been activated. No one had even noticed it.

Maybe it's one of those things where it's so common the locals don't even notice it, I thought, they can't even smell it anymore. Like a lumber mill or chemical plant. We had gone to see Cath's uncle in Nebraska one time, and I'd asked him if he minded the smell from the feed lots.

"What smell?" he'd said.

But manure didn't smell like violence, like panic. And it was everywhere. If this was a persistent, pervasive smell, why hadn't I smelled it in Piccadilly Circus or Leicester Square?

I was all the way to South Kensington before I realized I had gone back down the passage without even being aware of it, boarded a train, ridden seven stops. And not gotten the tickets.

I got off the train, half-intending to go back, and then stood there on the platform uncertainly. This was no carton of rotten eggs, or blood samples, no localized phenomenon of Charing Cross. So what was it?

A woman got off the train, glancing irritatedly at her watch. I looked at mine. Five-thirty. It was too late to go back to the ticket agent's, too late to do anything but figure out which line to take to get home.

I felt a rush of relief that I wouldn't have to go back to Cannon Street, wouldn't have to face that wind again. What were they, I wondered, pulling out my tube map, that they produced such a feeling of fear?

I thought about it all the way back to the hotel, wondering if I should tell Cath. It would only confirm her in her opinion of the tube, and she would hardly be in the mood for wild stories about winds in the tube, not if she'd been waiting for me to show up. Cath hated being late to things, and it was already after six. By the time I made it back to the hotel it would be nearly six-thirty.

It was six forty-five. I pushed unavailingly on the lift button for five minutes and then took the stairs. Maybe she was running late, too. When she and Sara started shopping, they lost all track of time. I fished the room key out of my pants pocket.

Cath opened the door.

"I'm late, I know," I said, unpinning my nametag and peeling my jacket off. "Give me five minutes. Are you ready?"

"Yes," she said. She walked over and sat down on the bed, watching me.

"How was Harrods?" I said, unbuttoning my shirt. "Did you get your china?"

"No," she said, looking down at her folded hands.

I grabbed a clean shirt out of my suitcase and pulled it on. "But you and Sara had a good time?" I said, buttoning it. "What did you buy? Elliott said he was afraid you'd clean out Harrods between the two of you." I stopped, looking at her. "What's wrong?" I said. "Did the kids call? Has something happened?"

"The kids are fine," she said.

"But something happened," I said. "The taxi you and Sara took had an accident."

She shook her head. "Nothing happened," and then, still looking down at her hands, "Sara's having an affair."

"What?" I said stupidly.

"She's having an affair."

"*Sara?*" I said, disbelieving. Not Sara, affectionate, loyal Sara.

Cath nodded, still looking at her hands.

I sat down on my bed. "Did she tell you she was?"

"No, of course not," Cath said, standing up and walking over to the mirror.

"Then how do you know?" I asked, but I knew how. The same way she had known that the kids were getting chicken pox, that her sister was engaged, that her father was worried about his business. Cath had always noticed things before anybody else—she was equipped with some kind of super-sensitive radar that picked up on subliminal signs or vibrations in the air or something. And she was always right.

But Sara and Elliott had been married as long as we had. They were the couple at the top of our "Marriage is Still a Viable Institution" list.

"Are you sure?" I said.

"I'm sure."

I wanted to ask her how she knew, but there wasn't any point. When Ashley had gotten the chicken pox, she'd said, "Her eyes always look bright when she has a fever, and, besides, Lindsay had them two weeks ago," but most of the time she could only shake her short blonde hair, unable to say how she'd reached her conclusion, but always right. Always right.

"But—I saw Elliott today," I said. "He was fine. He didn't—" I thought back over everything he had said, wondering if there had been some indication in it that he was worried or unhappy. He had said Sara and Cath would spend a lot of money, but he always said that. "He sounded fine."

"Put your tie on," she said.

"But if she—we don't have to go if you don't want to," I said.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "No. No, we have to go."

"Maybe you misinterpreted—"

"I didn't," she said and went into the bathroom and shut the door.

We had trouble getting a taxi. The Connaught's doorman seemed to have disappeared, and all of the black boxy London cabs ignored my frantic waving. Even when one finally stopped, it took us forever to get to the party. "Theatergoers," the cabbie explained cheerfully of the traffic. "You two plan to see any plays while you're here?"

I wondered if Cath would still want to go to a play, convinced as she was that Sara was having an affair, but as we passed the Savoy, its neon sign for *Miss Saigon* blazing, she asked, "What play did you get tickets for?"

"I didn't," I said. "I ran out of time." I started to say that I intended to get them tomorrow, but she wasn't listening.

"Harrods didn't have my china," she said, and her tone sounded as hopeless as it had telling me about Sara. "They discontinued the pattern four years ago."

We were nearly an hour and a half late for the party. Elliott and Sara have probably long since left for dinner, I thought, and was secretly relieved.

"Cath!" Marjorie said as we walked in the door and hurried over with Cath's nametag. "You look wonderful! I have so much to tell you!"

"I'm going to go look for the Old Man," I said. "I'll see if he wants to go to dinner afterward." He would probably drag us off to Soho or Hampstead Heath. He always knew some out-of-the-way place that had eel pie or authentic English stout.

I set off through the crowd. You could usually locate the Old Man by the crowd of people gathered around, and the laughter. And the proximity to the bar, I thought, spotting a huddle of people in that direction.

I waded toward them through the crush, grabbing a glass of wine off a tray as I went, but it wasn't the Old Man. It was the people who'd been at lunch. They were discussing, of all things, the Beatles, but at least it wasn't the Decline and Fall.

"The three of them were talking about a reunion tour," McCord was saying. "I suppose that's all off now."

"The Old Man took us on a Beatles tour," I said. "Has anybody seen him? He insisted we recreate all the album covers. We nearly got killed crossing Abbey Road."

"I don't think he's coming down from Cambridge till tomorrow," McCord said. "It's a long drive."

The Old Man had driven us four hundred miles to see London Bridge on Lake Havasu. I peered over their heads, trying to spot the Old Man. I couldn't see him, but I did spot Evers, which meant Sara and Elliott were still here. Cath was over by the door with Marjorie.

"It was just so *sad* about Linda McCartney," the Gap woman said.

I took a swig of my wine and remembered too late this was a sherry party.

"How old was she?" McCord was asking.

"Fifty-three."

"I know three women who've been diagnosed with breast cancer," the Gap woman said. "*Three*. It's dreadful."

"One keeps wondering who's next," the other woman said.

"Or *what's* next," McCord said. "You he ard about Stewart, didn't you?"

I handed my sherry glass to the Gap woman, who looked at me, annoyed, and started through the crowd toward Cath, but now I couldn't see her either. I stopped, craning my neck to see over the crowd.

"*There* you are, you handsome thing!" Sara said, coming up behind me and putting her arm around my waist. "We've been looking all over for you!" She kissed me on the cheek. "Elliott's been fretting that you were going to make us all go see *Cats*. He *loathes Cats*, and everyone who comes to visit drags us to it. And you know how he frets over things. You didn't, did you? Get tickets for *Cats?*"

"No," I said, staring at her. She looked the same as always—her dark hair still tucked behind her ears, her eyebrows still arched mischievously. This was the same old Sara who'd gone with us to *Kismet*, to Lake Havasu, to Abbey Road.

Cath was wrong. She might pick up subliminal signals about other people, but this time she was wrong. Sara wasn't acting guilty or uneasy, wasn't avoiding my eyes, wasn't avoiding Cath.

"Where *is* Cath?" she asked, standing on tiptoe to peer over the crowd. "I have something I've got to tell her."

"What?"

"About her china. We couldn't find it today, did she tell you? Well, after I got home, I thought, I'll wager they have it at Selfridge's. They're always years behind the times. Oh, there she is." She waved frantically. "I want to tell her before we leave," she said and took off through the crowd. "Find Elliott and tell him I'll only be a sec. And tell him we aren't seeing *Cats*," she called back to me. "I don't want him stewing all night. He's over there somewhere." She waved vaguely in the direction of the door, and I pushed my way between people till I found him, standing by the front door.

"You haven't seen Sara, have you?" he said. "Evers is bringing his car round."

"She's talking to Cath," I said. "She said she'll be here in a minute."

"Are you kidding? When those two get together—" He shook his head indulgently. "Sara said they had a wonderful time today."

"Is the Old Man here yet?" I said.

"He called and said he couldn't make it tonight. He said to tell you he'll see us tomorrow. I'm looking forward to it. We've scarcely seen him since he moved to Cambridge. We're down in Wimbledon, you know."

"And he hasn't swooped down and kidnapped you to go see Dickens's elbow or something?"

"Not lately. Oh, God, do you remember that time Sara mentioned Arthur Conan Doyle, and he dragged us up and down Baker Street, looking for Sherlock Holmes's missing flat?"

I laughed, remembering him knocking on doors, demanding, "What have you done with 221B, madam?" deciding we needed to call in Scotland Yard.

"And then demanding to know what they'd done with the yard," Elliott said, laughing.

"Did you tell him we're all going to a play together Saturday?"

"Yes. You didn't get tickets for *Cats*, did you?"

"I didn't get tickets for anything," I said. "I ran out of time."

"Well, *don't* get tickets for *Cats*. Or *Phantom*."

Sara came running up, flushed and breathless. "I'm sorry. Cath and I got to talking," she said. She gave me a smacking kiss on the lips. "Goodbye, you adorable hunk. See you Saturday."

"Come *on*," Elliott said. "You can kiss him all you like on Saturday." He hustled her out the door. "And not *Les Miz!*" he shouted back to me.

I stood, smiling after them. You're wrong, Cath, I thought. Look at them. Not only would Sara never have kissed me like that if she were having an affair, but Elliott wouldn't have looked on complacently like that, and neither of them would have been talking about china, about *Cats*.

Cath had made a mistake. Her radar, usually so infallible, had messed up this time. Sara and Elliott's marriage was fine. Nobody was having an affair, and we'd all have a great time Saturday night.

The mood persisted through the rest of the evening, in spite of Marjorie's latching onto me and telling me all about the Decline and Fall of her father, who she was going to have to put in a nursing home, and our finding out that the pub that had had such great fish and chips the first time we'd been here had burned down.

"It doesn't matter," Cath said, standing on the corner where it had been. "Let's go to the Lamb and Crown. I know it's still there. I saw it on the way to Harrods this morning."

"That's on Wilton Place, isn't it?" I said, pulling out my tube map. "That's right across from Hyde Park Corner Station. We can take—"

"A taxi," Cath said.

Cath didn't say anything else about the affair she thought Sara was having, except to tell me they were going shopping again the next day. "Selfridge's first, and then Reject China—" and I wondered if she had realized, seeing Sara at the party, that she'd made a mistake.

But in the morning, as I was leaving, she said, "Sara called and cancelled while you were in the shower."

"They can't go to the play with us Saturday?"

"No," Cath said. "She isn't going shopping with me today. She said she had a headache."

"She must have drunk some of that awful sherry," I said. "So what are you going to do? Do you want to come have lunch with me?"

"I think it's someone at the conference."

"Who?" I said, lost.

"The man Sara's having an affair with," she said, picking up her guidebook. "If it was someone who lived here, she wouldn't risk seeing him while we're here."

"She's *not* having an affair," I said. "I saw her. I saw Elliott. He—"

"Elliott doesn't know." She jammed the guidebook savagely into her bag. "Men never notice anything."

She began stuffing things into her bag—her sunglasses, her passport. "We're having dinner with the Hugheses tonight at seven. I'll meet you back here at five-thirty." She picked up her umbrella.

"You're wrong," I said. "They've been married longer than we have. She's crazy about Elliott. Why would somebody with that much to lose risk it all by having an affair?"

She turned and looked at me, still holding the umbrella. "I don't know," she said bleakly.

"Look," I said, suddenly sorry for her, "why don't you come and have lunch with the Old Man and me? He'll probably get us thrown out like he did at that Indian restaurant. It'll be fun."

She shook her head. "You and Arthur will want to catch up, and I don't want to wait on Selfridge's." She looked up at me. "When you see Arthur—" she paused, looking like she did when she was thinking about Sara.

"You think he's having an affair, too, oh, Madame Knows-All, Sees-All?"

"No," she said. "He was older than us."

"Which was why we called him the Old Man," I said, "and you think he'll have gotten a cane and grown a long white beard?"

"No," she said, and slung her bag over her shoulder. "I think if they have my china at Selfridge's, I'll buy twelve place settings."

She was wrong, and I would prove it to her. We would have a great time at the play, and she would realize Sara couldn't be having an affair. If I could get the tickets. *Ragtime* had been sold out, which meant *The Tempest* was likely to be, too, and there weren't a lot of other choices, since Elliott had said no to *Sunset Boulevard*. And *Cats*, I thought, looking at the theater posters as I went down the escalator. And *Les Miz*.

The Tempest and the Hayley Mills thing, *Endgames*, were both at theaters close to Leicester Square. If I couldn't get tickets at either, there was a ticket agent in Lisle Street.

The Tempest was sold out, as I'd expected. I walked over to the Lyric.

Endgames had five seats in the third row center of the orchestra. "Great," I said, and slapped down my American Express, thinking how much things had changed.

In the old days I would have been asking if they didn't have anything in the sherpa section, seats so steep we had to clutch the arms of our seats to keep from plummeting to our deaths and we had to rent binoculars to even see the stage.

And in the old days, I thought grimly, Cath would have been at my side, making rapid calculations to see if our budget could afford even the cheap seats. And now I was getting tickets in third row center, and not even asking the price, and Cath was on her way to Selfridge's in a taxi.

The girl handed me the tickets. "What's the nearest tube station?" I asked.

"Tottenham Court Road," she said.

I looked at my tube map. I could take the Central Line over to Holborn and then a train straight to South Kensington. "How do I get there?"

She waved an arm full of bracelets vaguely north. "You go up St. Martin's Lane."

I went up St. Martin's Lane, and up Monmouth, and up Mercer and Shaftesbury and New Oxford. There clearly had to be closer stations than Tottenham Court Road, but it was too late to do anything about it now. And I wasn't about to take a taxi.

It took me half an hour to make the trek, and another ten to reach Holborn, during which I figured out that the Lyric had been less than four blocks from Piccadilly Circus. I'd forgotten how deep the station was, how long the escalators were. They seemed to go down for miles. I rattled down the slatted wooden rungs and down the passage, glancing at my watch as I walked.

Nine-thirty. I'd make it to the conference in plenty of time. I wondered when the Old Man would get there. He had to drive down from Cambridge, I thought, going down a short flight of steps behind a man in a tweed jacket, which was an hour and a—

I was on the bottom step when the wind hit. This time it was not so much a blast as a sensation of a door opening onto a cold room.

A cellar, I thought, groping for the metal railing. No. Colder. Deathly cold. A meat locker. A frozen food storage vault. With a sharp, unpleasant chemical edge, like disinfectant. A sickening smell.

No, not a refrigerated vault, I thought, a biology lab, and recognized the smell as formaldehyde. And something under it. I shut my mouth, held my breath, but the sweet, sickening stench was already in my nostrils, in my throat. Not a biology lab, I thought in horror. A charnelhouse.

It was over, the door shutting as suddenly as it had opened, but the bite of the icy air was still in my nostrils, the nasty taste of formaldehyde still in my mouth. Of corruption and death and decay.

I stood there on the bottom step taking shallow, swallowing breaths, while people walked around me. I could see the man in the tweed jacket, rounding the corner in the passage ahead. He *must* have felt it, I thought. He was right in front of me. I started after him, dodging around a pair of children, an Indian woman in a sari, a housewife with a string bag, finally catching up to him as he turned out onto the crowded platform.

"Did you feel that wind?" I asked, taking hold of his sleeve. "Just now, in the tunnel?"

He looked alarmed, and then, as I spoke, tolerant. "You're from the States, aren't you? There's always a slight rush of air as a train enters one of the tunnels. It's perfectly ordinary. Nothing to be alarmed about." He looked pointedly at my hand on his sleeve.

"But this one was ice-cold," I persisted. "It—"

"Ah, yes, well, we're very near the river here," he said, looking less tolerant. "If you'll excuse me." He freed his arm. "Have a pleasant holiday," he said and walked away through the crowd to the farthest end of the platform.

I let him go. He clearly hadn't felt it. But he had *had* to, I thought. He was right in front of me.

Unless it wasn't real, and I was experiencing some bizarre form of hallucination.

"Finally," a woman said, looking down the track, and I saw a train was approaching. Wind fluttered a flyer stuck on the wall and then the blonde hair of the woman standing closest to the edge. She turned unconcernedly toward the man next to her, saying something to him, shifting the leather strap of the bag on her shoulder.

It hit again, an onslaught of cold and chemicals and corruption, a stench of decay.

He has to have felt that, I thought, looking down the platform, but he was unconcernedly boarding the train, the tourists next to him were looking up at the train and back down at their tube maps, unaware.

They have to have felt it, I thought, and saw an elderly black man. He was halfway down the platform, wearing a plaid jacket. He shuddered as the wind hit, and then hunched his gray grizzled head into his shoulders like a turtle withdrawing into its shell.

He felt it, I thought, and started toward him, but he was already getting on the train, the doors were already starting to close. Even running, I wouldn't reach him.

I bounded onto the nearest car as the doors whooshed shut and stood there just inside the door, waiting for the next station. As soon as the doors opened I jumped out, holding onto the edge of the door, to see if he got off. He didn't, or at the next station, and Bond Street was easy. Nobody got off.

"Marble Arch," the disembodied voice said, and the train pulled into the tiled station.

What the hell was at Marble Arch? There had never been this many people when Cath and I stayed at the Royal Hernia. Everybody on the train was getting off.

But was the old man? I leaned out from the door, trying to see if he'd gotten off.

I couldn't see him for the crowd. I stepped forward and was immediately elbowed aside by an equally large herd of people getting on.

I headed down the platform toward his car, craning my neck to spot his plaid jacket, his grizzled head in the exodus.

"The doors are closing," the voice of the tube said, and I turned just in time to see the train pull out, and the old man sitting inside, looking out at me.

And now what? I thought, standing on the abruptly deserted platform. Go back to Holborn and see if it happened again and somebody else felt it? Somebody who wasn't getting on a train.

Certainly nothing was going to happen here. This was our station, the one we had set out from every morning, come home to every night, the first time we were here, and there hadn't been any strange winds. The Royal Hernia was only three blocks away, and we had run up the drafty stairs, holding hands, laughing about what the Old Man had said to the verger in Canterbury when he had shown us Thomas More's grave—

The Old Man. He would know what was causing the winds, or how to find out. He loved mysteries. He had dragged us to Greenwich, the British Museum, and down into the crypt of St. Paul's, trying to find out what had happened to the arm Nelson lost in one of his naval battles. If anybody could, he'd find out what was causing these winds.

And he should be here by now, I thought, looking at my watch. Good God. It was nearly one. I went over to the tube map on the wall to find the best way over to the conference. Go to Notting Hill Gate and take the District and Circle Line. I looked up at the sign above the platform to see how long it would be till the next train, so that when the wind hit, I didn't have time to hunch down the way the old man had, to flinch away from the blow. My neck was fully extended, like Sir Thomas More's on the block.

And it was like a blade, slicing through the platform with killing force. No charnelhouse smell this time, no heat. Nothing but blast and the smell of salt and iron. The scent of terror and blood and sudden death.

What *is* it? I thought, clutching blindly for the tiled wall. What *are* they?

The Old Man, I thought again. I have to find the Old Man.

I took the tube to South Kensington and ran all the way to the conference, half-afraid he wouldn't be there, but he was. I could hear his voice when I came in. The usual admiring group was clustered around him. I started across the lobby toward them.

Elliott detached himself from the group and came over to me.

"I need to see the Old Man," I said.

He put a restraining hand on my arm. "Tom—" he said.

He looked like Cath had, sitting on the bed, telling me Sara was having an affair.

"What's wrong?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"Nothing," he said, glancing back toward the lounge. "Arthur—nothing." He let go of my arm. "He'll be overjoyed to see you. He's been asking for you."

The Old Man was sitting in an easy chair, holding court. He looked exactly the same as he had twenty years ago, his frame still lanky, his light hair still falling boyishly over his forehead.

See, Cath, I thought. No long white beard. No cane.

He broke off as soon as he saw us and stood up. "Tom, you young reprobate!" he said, and his voice sounded as strong as ever. "I've been waiting for you to get here all morning. Where were you?"

"In the tube," I said. "Something happened. I—"

"In the *tube?* What were you doing down in the tube?"

"I was—"

"Never use the tube anymore," he said. "It's gone completely to hell ever since Tony Blair got into office. Like everything else."

"I want you to come with me," I said. "I want to show you something."

"Come where?" he said. "Down in the tube? Not on your life." He sat back down. "I *loathe* the tube. Smelly, dirty—"

He sounded like Cath.

"Look," I said, wishing there weren't all these people around. "Something peculiar happened to me in Charing Cross Station yesterday. You know the winds that blow through the tunnels when the trains come in?"

"I certainly do. Dreadful drafty places—"

"Exactly," I said. "It's the drafts I want you to see. Feel. They—"

"And catch my death of cold? No, thank you."

"You don't understand," I said. "These weren't ordinary drafts. I was heading for the Northern Line platform, and—"

"You can tell me about it at lunch." He turned back to the others. "Where shall we go?"

He had never, ever, in all the years I'd known him, asked anybody where to go for lunch. I blinked stupidly at him.

"How about the Bangkok House?" Elliott said.

The Old Man shook his head. "Their food's too spicy. It always makes me bloat."

"There's a sushi place round the corner," one of the admiring circle volunteered.

"*Sushi!*" he said, in a tone that put an end to the discussion.

I tried again. "Yesterday I was in Charing Cross Station, and this wind, this *blast* hit me that smelled like sulfur. It—"

"It's the damned smog," the Old Man said. "Too many cars. Too many people. It's got nearly as bad as it was in the old days, when there were coal fires."

Coal, I thought. Could that have been the smell I couldn't identify? Coal smelled of sulfur.

"The inversion layer makes it worse," the admirer who'd suggested sushi said.

"Inversion layer?" I said.

"Yes," he said, pleased to have been noticed. "London's in a shallow depression that causes inversion layers. That's when a layer of warm air above the ground traps the surface air under it, so the smoke and particulates collect—"

"I thought we were going to lunch," the Old Man said petulantly.

"Remember the time we tried to find out what had happened to Sherlock Holmes's address?" I said. "This is an even stranger mystery."

"That's *right,*" he said. "221B Baker Street. I'd forgotten that. Do you remember the time I took you on a tour of Sir Thomas More's head? Elliott, tell them what Sara said in Canterbury."

Elliott told them, and they roared with laughter, the Old Man included. I half expected somebody to say, "Those were the days."

"Tom, tell everybody about that time we went to see *Kismet,*" the Old Man said.

"We've got tickets for *Endgames* for the five of us for tomorrow night," I said, even though I knew what was coming.

He was already shaking his head. "I never go to plays anymore. The theater's gone to hell like everything else. Lot of modernist nonsense." he smacked his hands on the arms of the easy chair. "Lunch! Did we decide where we're going?"

"What about the New Delhi Palace?" Elliott said.

"Can't handle Indian food," the Old Man, who had once gotten us thrown out of the New Delhi Palace by dancing with the Tandoori chicken, said. "Isn't there anywhere that serves plain, ordinary food?"

"Wherever we're going, we need to make up our minds," the admirer said. "The afternoon session starts at two."

"We can't miss that," the Old Man said. He looked around the circle. "So where are we going? Tom, are you coming to lunch with us?"

"I can't," I said. "I wish you'd come with me. It would be like old times."

"Speaking of old times," the Old Man said, turning back to the group, "I still haven't told you about the time I got thrown out of *Kismet*. What was that harem girl's name, Elliott?"

"Lalume," Elliott said, turning to look at the Old Man, and I made my escape.

An inversion layer. Holding the air down so it couldn't escape, trapping it below ground so that smoke and particulates, and smells, became concentrated, intensified.

I took the tube back to Holborn and went down to the Central Line to look at the ventilation system. I found a couple of wall grates no larger than the size of a theater handbill and a louvered vent two-thirds of the way down the west-bound passage, but no fans, nothing that moved the air or connected it with the outside.

There had to be one. The deep stations went down hundreds of feet. They couldn't rely on nature recirculating the air, especially with diesel fumes and carbon monoxide from the traffic up above. There must be ventilation. But some of these tube stations had been built as long ago as the 1880s, and Holborn looked like it hadn't been repaired since then.

I went out into the large room containing the escalators and stood, looking up. It was open all the way to the ticket machines at the top, and the station had wide doors on three sides, all open to the outside.

Even without ventilation, the air would eventually make its way up and out onto the streets of London. Wind would blow in from outside, and rain, and the movement of the people hurrying through the station, up the escalators, down the passages, would circulate it. But if there was an inversion layer, trapping the air close to the ground, keeping it from escaping—

Pockets of carbon monoxide and deadly methane accumulated in coal mines. The tube was a lot like a mine, with its complicated bendings and turnings of its tunnels. Could pockets of air have accumulated in the train tunnels, becoming more concentrated, more lethal as time went by?

The inversion layer would explain why there were winds but not what had caused them in the first place. An IRA bombing, like I had thought when I felt the first one? That would explain the blast and the smell of explosives, but not the formaldehyde. Or the stifling smell of dirt in Charing Cross.

A collapse of one of the tunnels? Or a train accident?

I made the long trek back up to the station and asked the guard next to the ticket machines, "Do these tunnels ever collapse?"

"Oh, no, sir, they're quite safe." He smiled reassuringly. "There's no need to worry."

"But there must be accidents occasionally," I said.

"I assure you, sir, the London Underground is the safest in the world."

"What about bombings?" I asked. "The IRA—"

"The IRA has signed the peace agreement," he said, looking at me suspiciously.

A few more questions, and I was likely to find myself arrested as an IRA bomber. I would have to ask the Old—Elliott. And in the meantime, I could try to find out if there were winds in all the stations or just a few.

"Can you show me how to get to the Tower of London?" I asked him, extending my tube map like a tourist.

"Yes, sir, you take the Central Line, that's this red line, to Bank," he said, tracing his finger along the map, "and then change to the District and Circle. And don't worry. The London Underground is perfectly safe."

Except for the winds, I thought, getting on the escalator. I got out a pen and marked an X on the stations I'd been to as I rode down. Marble Arch, Charing Cross, Sloane Square.

I hadn't been to Russell Square. I rode there and waited in the passages and then on both platforms through two trains. There wasn't anything at Russell Square, but on the Metropolitan Line at St. Pancras there was the same shattering blast as at Charing Cross—heat and the acrid smells of sulfur and violent destruction.

There wasn't anything at Barbican, or Aldgate, and I thought I knew why. At both of them the tracks were above-ground, with the platform open to the air. The winds would disperse naturally instead of being trapped, which meant I could eliminate most of the suburban stations.

But St. Paul's and Chancery Lane were both underground, with deep, drafty tunnels, and there was nothing in either of them except a faint scent of diesel and mildew. There must be some other factor at work.

It isn't the line they're on, I thought, riding toward Warren Street. Marble Arch and Holborn were on the Central Line, but Charing Cross wasn't, and neither was St. Pancras. Maybe it was the conversion of them. Chancery Lane, St. Paul's, and Russell Square all had only one line. Holborn had two lines, and Charing Cross had three. St. Pancras had five.

Those are the stations I should be checking, I thought, the ones where multiple lines meet, the ones honeycombed with tunnels and passages and turns. Monument, I thought, looking at the circles where green and purple and red lines converged. Baker Street and Moorgate.

Baker Street was closest, but hard to get to. Even though I was only two stops away, I'd have to switch over at Euston, take the Northern going the other way back to St. Pancras, and catch the Bakerloo. I was glad Cath wasn't here to say, "I thought you said it was easy to get anywhere on the tube."

Cath! I'd forgotten all about meeting her at the hotel so we could go to dinner with the Hugheses.

What time was it? Only five, thank God. I looked hastily at the map. Good. Northern down to Leicester Square and then the Piccadilly Line, and who says it isn't easy to get anywhere on the tube? I'd be to the Connaught in less than half an hour.

And when I got there I'd tell Cath about the winds, even if she did hate the tube. I'd tell her about all of it, the Old Man and the charnelhouse smell and the old man in the plaid jacket.

But she wasn't there. She'd left a note on the pillow of my bed. "Meet you at Grimaldi's. Seven P.M."

No explanation. Not even a signature, and the note looked hasty, scribbled. What if Sara called? I wondered, a thought as chilly as the wind in Marble Arch. What if Cath had been right about her, the way she'd been right about the Old Man?

But when I got to Grimaldi's, it turned out she'd only been shopping. "The woman in the china department at Fortnum and Mason's told me about a place in Bond Street that specialized in discontinued patterns."

Bond Street. It was a wonder we hadn't run into each other. But she wasn't in the tube station, I thought with a flash of resentment. She was safely above-ground in a taxi.

"They didn't have it either," she said, "but the clerk suggested I try a shop next door to the Portmerion store which was clear out in Kensington. It took the rest of the day. How was the conference? Was Arthur there?"

You know he was, I thought. She had foreseen his having gotten old, she'd tried to warn me that first morning in the hotel, and I hadn't believed her.

"How was he?" Cath asked.

You already know, I thought bitterly. Your antennae pick up vibrations from everybody. Except your husband.

And even if I tried to tell her, she'd be too wrapped up in her precious pattern to hear me.

"He's fine," I said. "We had lunch and then spent the whole afternoon together. He hadn't changed a bit."

"Is he going to the play with us?"

"No," I said and was saved by the Hugheses coming in right then, Mrs. Hughes, looking frail and elderly, and her strapping sons Milford Junior and Paul and their wives.

Introductions all around, and it developed that the blonde with Milford Junior wasn't his wife, it was his fiancée. "Barbara and I just couldn't talk to each other anymore," he confided to me over cocktails. "All she was interested in was buying things, clothes, jewelry, furniture."

China, I thought, looking across the room at Cath.

At dinner I was seated between Paul and Milford Jr., who spent the meal discussing the Decline and Fall of the British Empire.

"And now Scotland wants to separate," Milford said. "Who's next? Sussex? The City of London?"

"At least perhaps then we'd see decent governmental services. The current state of the streets and the transportation system—"

"I was in the tube today," I said, seizing the opening. "Do either of you know if Charing Cross has ever been the site of a train accident?"

"I shouldn't wonder," Milford said. "The entire system's a disgrace. Dirty, dangerous—the last time I rode the tube, a thief tried to pick my pocket on the escalator."

"I never go down in the tube anymore," Mrs. Hughes put in from the end of the table where she and Cath were deep in a discussion of china shops in Chelsea. "I haven't since Milford died."

"There are beggars everywhere," Paul said. "Sleeping on the platforms, sprawled in the passages. It's nearly as bad as it was during the Blitz."

The Blitz. Air raids and incendiaries and fires. Smoke and sulfur and death.

"The Blitz?" I said.

"During Hitler's bombing of London in World War II, masses of people sheltered in the tubes," Milford said. "Along the tracks, on the platforms, even on the escalators."

"Not that it was any safer than staying above-ground," Paul said.

"The shelters were hit?" I said eagerly.

Paul nodded. "Paddington. And Marble Arch. Forty people were killed in Marble Arch."

Marble Arch. Blast and blood and terror.

"What about Charing Cross?" I asked.

"I've no idea," Milford said, losing interest. "They should pass legislation keeping beggars out of the Underground. And requiring cabbies to speak acceptable English."

The Blitz. Of course. That would explain the smell of gunpowder or whatever it was. And the blast. A high-explosive bomb.

But the Blitz had been over fifty years ago. Could the air from a bomb blast have stayed down in the tube all those years without dissipating?

There was one way to find out. The next morning I took the tube to Tottenham Court Road, where there was a whole street of bookstores, and asked for a book about the history of the Underground in the Blitz.

"The Underground?" the girl at Foyle's, the third place I'd tried, said vaguely. "The Tube Museum might have something."

"Where's that?" I asked.

She didn't know, and neither did the ticket vendor back at the tube station, but I remembered seeing a poster for it on the platform at Oxford Circus during my travels yesterday. I consulted my tube map, took the train to Victoria, and changed for Oxford Circus, where I checked five platforms before I found it.

Covent Garden. The London Transport Museum. I checked the map again, took the Central Line across to Holborn, transferred to the Piccadilly Line, and went to Covent Garden.

And apparently it had been hit, too, because a gust of face-singeing heat struck me before I was a third of the way down the tunnel. There was no smell of explosives, though, or of sulfur or dust. Just ash and fire and hopeless desperation that it was all, all burning down.

The scent of it was still with me as I hurried upstairs and out into the market, through the rows of carts selling T-shirts and postcards and toy double-decker buses, to the Transport Museum.

It was full of T-shirts and postcards, too, all sporting the Underground symbol or replicas of the tube map. "I need a book on the tube during the Blitz," I asked a boy across a counter stacked with "Mind the Gap" placemats and playing cards.

"The Blitz?" he said vaguely.

"World War II," I said, which didn't evoke any recognition either.

He waved a hand loosely to the left. "The books are over there."

They weren't. They were on the far wall, past a rack of posters of tube ads from the Twenties and Thirties, and most of what books they had were about trains, but I finally found two histories of the tube and a paperback called *London in Wartime*. I bought them all and a notebook with a tube map on the cover.

The Transport Museum had a snack bar. I sat down at one of the plastic tables and began taking notes. Nearly all the tube stations had been used as shelters, and a lot of them had been hit—Euston Station, Aldwych, Monument. "In the aftermath of the bombing, the acrid smell of brick dust and cordite was everywhere," the paperback said. Cordite. That was what I had smelled.

Marble Arch had taken a direct hit, the bomb bursting like a grenade in one of the passages, ripping tiles off the walls as it exploded, sending them slicing through the people sheltered there. Which explained the smell of blood. And the lack of heat. It had been pure blast.

I looked up Holborn. There were several references to its having been used as a shelter, but nothing in any of the books that said it had taken a hit.

Charing Cross had, twice. It had been hit by a high-explosive bomb, and then by a V-2 rocket. The bomb had broken water mains and loosed an avalanche of dirt down onto the room containing the escalators. That was the damp earthiness I'd smelled—mud from the roof collapsing.

Nearly a dozen stations had been hit the night of May tenth, 1941: Cannon Street, Paddington, Blackfriars, Liverpool Street—

Covent Garden wasn't on the list. I looked it up in the paperback. The station hadn't been hit, but incendiaries had fallen all around Covent Garden, and the whole area had been on fire. Which meant that Holborn wouldn't have to have taken a direct hit either. There could have been a bombing nearby, with lots of deaths, that was responsible for Holborn's charnelhouse smell. And the fact that there had been fires all around Covent Garden fit with the fact that there hadn't been sulfur, or concussion.

It all fit—the smell of mud and cordite in Charing Cross, of smoke in Cannon Street, of blast and blood in Marble Arch. The winds I was feeling were the winds of the Blitz, trapped there by London's inversion layer, caught below ground with no way out, nowhere to go, held and recirculated and intensified through the years in the mazelike tunnels and passages and pockets of the tube. It all fit.

And there was a way to test it. I copied a list of all the stations I hadn't been to that had been hit—Blackfriars, Monument, Paddington, Liverpool Street. Praed Street, Bounds Green, Trafalgar Square and Balham had taken direct hits. If my theory was correct, the winds should definitely be there.

I started looking for them, using the tube map on the cover of my notebook. Bounds Green was far north on the Piccadilly Line, nearly to the legendary Cockfosters, and Balham was nearly as far south on the Northern Line. I couldn't find either Praed Street or Trafalgar Square. I wondered if those stations had been closed or given other names. The Blitz had, after all, been fifty years ago.

Monument was the closest. I could get there by way of the Central Line and then follow the Circle Line around to Liverpool Street and from there go on up to Bounds Green. Monument had been down near the docks—it should smell like smoke, too, and the river water they'd sprayed on the fire, and burning cotton and rubber and spices. A warehouse full of pepper had burned. That odor would be unmistakeable.

But I didn't smell it. I wandered up and down the passages of the Central and Northern and District Lines, stood on each of the platforms, waited in the corners near the stairways for over an hour, and nothing.

It doesn't happen all the time, I thought, taking the Circle Line to Liverpool Street. There's some other factor—the time of day or the temperature or the weather. Maybe the winds only blew when London was experiencing an inversion layer. I should have checked the weather this morning, I thought.

Whatever the factor was, there was nothing at Liverpool Street, either, but at Euston the wind hit me full force a minute after I had stepped off the train—a violent blast of soot and dread and charred wood. Even though I knew what it was now, I had to lean against the cold tiled wall a minute, till my heart stopped pounding, and the dry taste of fear in my mouth subsided.

I waited for the next train and the next, but the wind didn't repeat itself, and I went down to the Victoria Line, thought a minute, and went back up to the surface to ask the ticket seller if the tracks at Bounds Green were above-ground.

"I believe they are, sir," he said in a thick Scottish brogue.

"What about Balham?"

He looked alarmed. "Balham's the other way. It's not on the same line either."

"I know," I said. "Are they? Above-ground?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't know, sir. Sorry. If you're going to Balham, you go down to the Northern Line and take the train to Tooting Bec and Morden. Not the one to Elephant and Castle."

I nodded. Balham was even farther out in the suburbs than Bounds Green. The tracks were almost certain to be above-ground, but it was still worth a try.

Balham had taken the worst hit of any of the stations. The bomb had fallen just short of the station, but in the worst possible place. It had plunged the station into darkness, smashed the water and sewer pipes and the gas mains. Filthy water had rushed into the station in torrents, flooding the pitch-black passages, pouring down the stairs and into the tunnels. Three hundred people had drowned. And how could that not still be there, even if Balham was above-ground? And if it was there, the smell of sewage and gas and darkness would be unmistakable.

I didn't follow the ticket vendor's directions. I detoured to Blackfriars, since it was practically on the way, and stood around its yellow-tiled platforms for half an hour with no result before going on to Balham.

The train was nearly deserted for most of the long trip. From London Bridge out there were only two people in my car, a middle-aged woman reading a book and, at the far end, a young girl, crying.

She had spiked hair and a pierced eyebrow, and she cried helplessly, obliviously, making no attempt to wipe her mascaraed cheeks, or even turn her head toward the window.

I wondered if I should go ask her what was wrong or if the woman with the book would think I was preying on her. I wasn't even sure she would be aware of me if I did go over—there was a complete absorption to her sorrow that reminded me of Cath, intent on finding her china. I wondered if that was what had broken this girl's heart, that they had discontinued her pattern? Or had her friends betrayed her, had affairs, gotten old?

"Borough," the automated voice said, and she seemed to come to herself with a jerk, swiped at her cheeks, grabbed up her knapsack, and got off.

The middle-aged woman stayed on all the way to Balham, never once looking up from her book. When the train pulled in, I went over and stood next to her at the door so I could see what classic of literature she found so fascinating. It was *Gone With the Wind.*

But the winds aren't gone, I thought, leaning against the wall of Balham's platform, listening for the occasional sound of an incoming train, futilely waiting for a blast of sewage and methane and darkness. The winds of the Blitz are still here, endlessly blowing through the tunnels and passages of the tube like ghosts, wandering reminders of fire and flood and destruction.

If that was what they were. Because there was no smell of filthy water at Balham, or any indication that any had ever been there. The air in the passages was dry and dusty. There wasn't even a hint of mildew.

And even if there had been, it still wouldn't explain Holborn. I waited through three more trains on each side and then caught a train for Elephant and Castle and the Imperial War Museum.

"Experience the London Blitz," the poster had said, but the exhibit didn't have anything about which tube stations had been hit. Its gift shop yielded three more books, though. I scoured them from cover to cover, but there was no mention at all of Holborn or of any bombings near there.

And if the winds were leftover breezes from the Blitz, why hadn't I felt them the first time we were here? We had been in the tube all the time, going to the conference, going to plays, going off on the Old Man's wild hares, and there hadn't been even a breath of smoke, of sulfur!

What was different that time? The weather? It had rained nearly nonstop that first time. Could that have affected the inversion layer? Or was it something that had happened since then? Some change in the routing of the trains or the connections between stations?

I walked back to Elephant and Castle in a light rain. A man in a clerical collar and two boys with white surplices over their arms were coming out of the station. There must be a church nearby, I thought, and realized that could be the solution for Holborn.

The crypts of churches had been used as shelters during the Blitz. Maybe they had also been used as temporary morgues.

I looked up "morgue" and then, when that didn't work, "body disposal."

I was right. They had used churches, warehouses, even swimming pools after some of the worst air raids to store bodies. I doubted if there were any swimming pools near Holborn, but there might be a church.

There was only one way to find out—go back to Holborn and look. I looked at my tube map. Good. I could catch a train straight to Holborn from here. I went down to the Bakerloo Line and got on a northbound train. It was nearly as empty as the one I'd come out on, but when the doors opened at Waterloo, a huge crowd of people surged onto the train.

It can't be rush hour yet, I thought, and glanced at my watch. Six-fifteen. Good God. I was supposed to meet Cath at the theater at seven. And I was how many stops from the theater? I pulled out my tube map and clung to the overhead pole, trying to count. Embankment and then Charing Cross and Piccadilly Circus. Five minutes each, and another five to get out of the station in this crush. I'd make it. Barely.

"Service on the Bakerloo Line has been disrupted from Embankment north," the automated voice said as we pulled in. "Please seek alternate routes."

Not now! I thought, grabbing for my map. Alternate routes. I could take the Northern Line to Leicester Square and then change for Piccadilly Circus. No, it would be faster to get off at Leicester Square and run the extra blocks.

I raced off the train the minute the doors opeedn and down the corridor to the Northern Line. Five to seven, and I was still two stops away from Leicester Square, and four blocks from the theater. A train was coming in. I could hear its rumble down the corridor. I darted around people, shouting, "Sorry, sorry, sorry," and burst onto the packed northbound platform.

The train must have been on the southbound tracks. "Next train 4 min.," the overhead sign said.

Great, I thought, hearing it start up, pushing the air in front of it, creating a vacuum in its wake. Embankment had been hit. And that was all I needed right now, a blast from the Blitz.

I'd no sooner imagined it than it hit, whipping my hair and my coat lapels back, rattling the unglued edges of a poster for *Showboat*. There was no blast, no heat, even though Embankment was right on the river, where the fires had been the worst. It was cold, cold, but there was no smell of formaldehyde with it, no stench of decay. Only the icy chill and a smothering smell of dryness and of dust.

It should have been better than the other ones, but it wasn't. It was worse. I had to lean against the back wall of the platform for support, my eyes closed, before I could get on the train.

What *are* they? I thought, even though this proved they were the residue of the Blitz. Because Embankment had been hit. And people must have died, I thought. Because it was death I'd smelled. Death and terror and despair.

I stumbled onto the train. It was jammed tight, and the closeness, the knowledge that any wind, any air, couldn't reach me through this mass of people, revived me, calmed me, and by the time I pulled in to Leicester Square, I had recovered and was thinking only of how late I was.

Seven-ten. I could still make it, but just barely. At least Cath had the tickets, and with luck Elliott and Sara would get there in the meantime and they'd all be busy saying hello.

Maybe the Old Man changed his mind, I thought, and decided to come. Maybe yesterday he'd been under the weather, and tonight he'd be his old self.

The train pulled in. I raced down the passage, up the escalator, and out onto Shaftesbury. It was raining, but I didn't have time to worry about it.

"Tom! Tom!" a breathless voice shouted behind me.

I turned. Sara was frantically waving at me from half a block away.

"Didn't you hear me?" she said breathlessly, catching up to me. "I've been calling you ever since the tube."

She'd obviously been running. Her hair was mussed, and one end of her scarf dangled nearly to the ground.

"I know we're late," she said, pulling at my arm, "but I *must* catch my breath. You're not one of those dreadful men who've taken up marathon-running in old age, are you?"

"No," I said, moving over in front of a shop and out of the path of traffic.

"Elliott's always talking about getting a Stairmaster." She pulled her dangling scarf off and wrapped it carelessly around her neck. "I have *no* desire to get in shape."

Cath was wrong. That was all there was to it. Her radar had failed her and she was misinterpreting the whole situation.

I must have been staring. Sara put a defensive hand up to her hair. "I know I look a mess," she said, putting up her umbrella. "Oh, well. How late are we?"

"We'll make it," I said, taking her arm, and setting off toward the Lyric. "Where's Elliott?"

"He's meeting us at the theater. Did Cath get her china?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her since this morning," I said.

"Oh, look, there she is," Sara said, and began waving.

Cath was standing in front of the Lyric, next to the water-spotted sign that said, "Tonight's Performance Sold Out," looking numb and cold.

"Why didn't you wait inside out of the rain?" I said, leading them both into the lobby.

"We ran into each other coming out of the tube," Sara said, pulling off her scarf. "Or, rather, I saw Tom. I had to *scream* to get his attention. Isn't Elliott here yet?"

"No," Cath said.

"He and Mr. Evers came back after lunch. The day was *not* a success, so don't bring up the subject. Mrs. Evers insisted on buying everything in the entire gift shop, and then we couldn't find a taxi. Apparently there are no taxis down in Kew. I had to take the tube, and it was *blocks* to the station." She put her hand up to her hair. "I got blown to pieces."

"Did you change trains at Embankment?" I asked, trying to remember which line went out to Kew Gardens. Maybe she'd felt the wind, too. "Were you on the Bakerloo Line platform?"

"I don't remember," Sara said impatiently. "Is that the line for Kew? You're the tube expert."

"Do you want me to check your coats?" I said hastily.

Sara handed me hers, jamming her long scarf into one sleeve, but Cath shook her head. "I'm cold."

"You should have waited in the lobby," I said.

"Should I?" she said, and I looked at her, surprised. Was she mad I was late? Why? We still had fifteen minutes, and Elliott wasn't even here yet.

"What's the matter?" I started to say, but Sara was asking, "Did you get your china?"

"No," she said, still with that edge of anger in her voice. "Nobody has it."

"Did you try Selfridge's?" Sara asked, and I went off to check Sara's coat. When I came back, Elliott was there.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. He turned to me. "What happened to you this—"

"We were all late," I said, "except Cath, who, luckily, was the one with the tickets. You *do* have the tickets?"

Cath nodded and pulled them out of her evening bag. She handed them to me, and we went in. "Right-hand aisle and down to your right," the usher said. "Row three."

"No stairs to climb?" Elliott said. "No ladders?"

"No rock-axes and pitons," I said. "No binoculars."

"You're kidding," Elliott said. "I won't know how to act."

I stopped to buy programs from the usher. By the time we got to Row 3, Cath and Sara were already in their seats. "Good God," Elliott said as we sidled past the people on the aisle. "I'll bet you can actually *see* from here."

"Do you want to sit next to Sara?" I said.

"Good God, no," Elliott joked. "I want to be able to ogle the chorus girls without her smacking me with her program."

"I don't think it's that kind of play," I said.

"Cath, what's this play about?" Elliott said.

She leaned across Sara. "Hayley Mills is in it," she told him.

"Hayley Mills," he said reminiscently, leaning back, his hands behind his head. "I thought she was truly sexy when I was ten years old. Especially that dance number in *Bye-Bye, Birdie*."

"You're thinking of Ann-Margret, you fool," Sara said, reaching across me to smack him with her program. "Hayley Mills was in that one where she's the little girl who always saw the positive side of things—what was it called?"

I looked across at Cath, surprised she hadn't chimed in with the answer—she was the Hayley Mills fan. She was sitting with her coat pulled around her shoulders. Her face looked pinched with cold.

"*You* know Hayley Mills," Sara said to Elliott. "We watched her in *The Flame Trees of Thika.*"

Elliott nodded. "I always admired her chest. Or am I thinking of Annette?"

"I don't think this is that kind of play," Sara said.

It wasn't that kind of play. Everyone wore high-necked costumes, including Hayley Mills, who swept in swathed in a bulky coat. "I'm *so* sorry I'm late, dear," she said, taking off her coat to reveal a turtleneck sweater and going over to stand in front of a stage fire. "It's so cold out. And the air's so strange."

Whoever was playing her husband said, " 'Into my heart an air that kills from yon far country blows,' " and Elliott leaned over and whispered, "Oh, God, a *literary* play."

I'd missed the rest of the husband's line, but he must have asked Hayley why she was late because she said, "My assistant cut her hand, and I had to take her to hospital. It took forever for her to get stitched up."

A hospital. I hadn't considered that. Their morgues would have been full during the Blitz. Was there a hospital close to Holborn? I would have to ask Elliott at intermission.

A sudden rattle of applause brought me out of my reverie.

The stage was dark. I'd missed Scene I. When the lights went back up, I tried to focus on the play, so I could discuss it at least halfway intelligibly at the intermission.

"The wind is rising," Hayley Mills said, looking out an imaginary window.

"Storm brewing," a man, not her husband, said.

"That's what I fear," she said, rubbing her hands along her arms to warm them. "Oh, Derek, what if he finds out about us?"

I glanced sideways across Sara at Cath, but couldn't see her face in the darkened theater. She obviously hadn't known what this play was about, or she'd never have chosen it.

But Hayley wasn't acting anything like Sara. She chain-smoked, she paced, she hung up the phone hastily when her husband came into the room and was so obviously guilty no one, least of all her husband, could have failed to miss it.

Elliott certainly didn't. "The husband's got to be a complete moron," he said as soon as the curtain went down for the intermission. "Even the *dog* could deduce that she's having an affair. Why is it characters in plays never act any way remotely resembling real life?"

"Maybe because people in real life don't look like Hayley Mills," Cath said. "She *does* look wonderful, doesn't she, Sara? She hasn't aged a day."

"You're joking, right?" Elliott said. "All right, I know people kid themselves about their spouses having affairs, but—"

"I *have* to go to the bathroom," Cath said. "I suppose there'll be a horrible line. Come with me, Sara, and I'll tell you the saga of my china." They edged past us.

"Get us a glass of white wine," Sara called back from the aisle, and Elliott and I shouldered our way to the bar, which took ten minutes, and another five to get served. Sara and Cath still weren't back.

"So where were you all day?" Elliott asked me, sipping Sara's wine. "I looked for you at lunch."

"I was researching something," I said. "Holborn Tube station is in Bloomsbury, isn't it?"

"I think so," he said. "I rarely take the tube."

"Are there any hospitals near the tube station?"

"Hospitals?" he said bewilderedly. "I don't know. I don't think so."

"Or churches?"

"I don't know. What's this all about?"

"Have you ever heard of a thing called an inversion layer?" I said. "It's when air is trapped—"

"They simply must do something about the women's bathroom situation," Sara said, grabbing her wine and taking a sip. "I thought we were going to be in there the entire third act."

"Sounds like an excellent idea," Elliott said. "I don't mean to sound like the Old Man, but if this is any indication, plays truly have gone to hell! I mean, we're expected to believe that Hayley Mills's husband is so blind that he can't see his wife's in love with—the other one—what's his name—?"

"*Pollyanna,*" Cath said. "I've been trying to remember it all through the first two acts. The name of the little girl who always saw the positive side of things."

"Sara," I said, "are there any hospitals near Holborn?"

"The Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children. That's the one James Barrie left all the money to," she said. "Why?"

The Great Ormond Street Hospital. That had to be it. They had used it as a temporary morgue, and the air—

"It's so *obvious,*" Elliott said, still on the subject of infidelity. "The excuses Hayley Mills's character makes for where she's been—"

"She looks wonderful, doesn't she?" Cath said. "How old do you suppose she is? She looks so young!"

The end-of-intermission bell chimed.

"Let's go," Cath said, setting her wine down. "I don't want to have to crawl over all those people again."

Sara swallowed her wine at one gulp, and we went back down the aisle. We were too late. The people on the end had to stand up and let us past.

"But don't you agree," Elliott said, sitting down, "that any normal person—?"

"Shhh," Cath said, leaning all the way across Sara and me to shut him up. "The lights are going down."

They did, and I felt an odd sense of relief, as if we'd just avoided something terrible. The curtain began to go up.

"I still say," Elliott said in a stage whisper, "that nobody could have that many clues thrown at him and not realize his wife's having an affair."

"Why not?" Sara said, "You didn't," and Hayley Mills came onstage.

Beside me, in the dark, Elliott was applauding like everyone else, and I thought, it's as if nothing happened. Elliott will think he didn't really hear it, like the wind in the tube, over so fast you wonder if it was really real, and he'll decide it wasn't, he'll lean across me and say, "What do you mean? You're not having an affair, are you?" and Sara will whisper, "Of course not, you idiot. I just meant you never notice anything," and it won't all have blown up, it won't all—

"Who is it?" Elliott said.

His voice echoed in the space between two of Hayley Mills and her husband's lines, and a man in front of us turned around and glared.

"Who is it?" Elliott said again, louder. "Who are you having an affair with?"

Cath said, in a strangled voice, "Don't—"

"No, you're right," Elliott said, standing up. "What the hell difference does it make?" and pushed his way out over the people on the aisle.

Sara sat an endless minute, and then she plunged past us too, tripping over my foot and nearly falling as she did.

I looked over at Cath, wondering if I should go after Sara. I had the ticket for her coat and scarf in my pocket. Cath was staring stiffly up at the stage, her coat clutched tightly around her.

"This can't go on," Hayley Mills said, looking now fully as old as she was, but still going gamely on with her lines, "I want a divorce," and Cath stood up and pushed past me, me following clumsily after her, muttering, "Sorry, sorry," over and over to the people on the aisle.

"It's *over*," Hayley said from the stage. "Can't you *see* that?"

I didn't catch up to Cath till she was halfway through the lobby.

"Wait," I said, reaching for her arm. "Cath."

Her face was white and set. She pushed unseeingly through the glass doors and out onto the pavement, and then stood there, looking bewildered.

"I'll get a taxi," I said, thinking, At least we don't have to compete with the end-of-the-play crowd.

Wrong. People were streaming out of the Apollo, and farther down the street, *Miss Saigon,* and God knew what else. There were swarms of people on the curb and at the corner, shouting and whistling for taxis.

"Wait here," I said, pushing Cath back under the Lyric's marquee, and plunged out into the meleé, my arm thrust out. A taxi pulled toward the curb, but it was only avoiding a clot of people, newspapers over their heads, ducking across the street. The driver put his arm out and gestured toward the "in use" light on top of the taxi.

I stepped off the curb, scanning the mess for a taxi that didn't have its light on, jerking back again as a motorbike splashed by.

Cath tugged on the back of my jacket. "It's no use," she said. "*Phantom* just let out. We'll never get a taxi."

"I'll go to one of the hotels," I said, gesturing up the street, "and have the doorman get one. You stay here."

"No, it's all right," she said. "We can take the tube. Piccadilly Circus is close, isn't it?"

"Right down there," I said, pointing.

She nodded and put her purse uselessly over her head against the rain, and we darted out onto the sidewalk, through the crowd, and down the steps into Piccadilly Circus.

"At least it's dry in here," I said, fishing for change for a ticket for her.

She nodded again, shaking the skirt of her coat out.

There was a huge crush at the machines and an even bigger one at the turnstiles. I handed her her ticket, and she put it gingerly in the slot and yanked her hand back before the machine could suck it away.

None of the down escalators were working. People clomped awkwardly down the steps. Two punkers with shaved heads and bad skin shoved their way past, muttering obscenities.

At the bottom there was a nasty-looking puddle under the tube map. "We need the Piccadilly Line," I said, taking her arm and leading her down the tunnel and out onto the jammed platform. The LED sign overhead said, "Next train 2 min."

A train rumbled through on the other side and people poured onto the platform behind us, pushing us forward. Cath stiffened, staring down at the "Mind the Gap" sign, and I thought, all we need now is a rat. Or a knifing.

A train pulled in, and we pushed onto it, crammed together like sardines. "It'll thin out in a couple of stops," I said, and she nodded. She looked dazed, shell-shocked.

Like Elliott, staring blindly at the stage, saying in a flat voice, "Who are you having the affair with?," stumbling blindly over people's feet, people's knees, trying to get out of the row, looking like he'd been hit by a blast of sulfurous, deadly wind. Everything fine one minute, sipping wine and discussing Hayley Mills, and the next, a bomb ripping the world apart and everything in ruins.

"Green Park," the loudspeaker said, and the door opened and more people pushed on. "You better watch out!" a woman with matted hair said, shaking a finger in Cath's face. Her fingertip was stained blue-black. "You better! I mean it!"

"That's it," I said, pushing Cath behind me. "We're getting off at the next stop." I put my hand on her back and began propelling her through the mass of people toward the door.

"Hyde Park Corner," the loudspeaker said.

We got off, the door whooshed shut, and the train began to pull out.

"We'll go up top and get a taxi," I said tightly. "You were right. The tube's gone to hell."

It's all gone to hell, I thought bitterly, starting down the empty tunnel, Cath behind me. Sara and Elliott and London and Hayley Mills. All of it. The Old Man and Regent Street and us.

The wind caught me full in the face. Not from the train we had just gotten off of, from ahead of us somewhere, farther down the tunnel. And worse, worse, worse than before. I staggered back against the wall, doubling up like I'd been punched in the stomach. Disaster and death and devastation.

I straightened up, clutching my stomach, unable to catch my breath, and looked across the tunnel. Cath was standing with her back against the opposite wall, her hands flattened against the tiles, her face pinched and pale.

"You felt it," I said, and felt a vast relief.

"Yes."

Of course she felt it. This was Cath, who sensed things nobody else noticed, who had known Sara was having an affair, that the Old Man had turned into an old man. I should have gone and gotten her the first time it happened, dragged her down here, made her stand in the tunnels with me.

"Nobody else felt them," I said. "I thought I was crazy."

"No," she said, and there was something in her voice, in the way she stood huddled against the green-tiled wall, that told me what should have been obvious all along.

"You felt them that first time we were here," I said, amazed. "That's why you hate the tube. Because of the winds."

She nodded.

"That's why you wanted to take a taxi to Harrods," I said. "Why didn't you say something that first time?"

"We didn't have enough money for taxis," she said, "and you didn't seem to be aware of them."

I wasn't aware of anything, I thought, not Cath's obvious reluctance to go down into the tube stations, nor her flinching back from the incoming trains. She was watching for the next wind, I thought, remembering her peering nervously into the tunnel. She was waiting for it to hit.

"You should have told me," I said. "If you'd told me, I could have helped you figure out what they were so they wouldn't frighten you anymore."

She looked up. "What they were?" she repeated blankly.

"Yes. I've figured out what's causing them. It's because of the inversion layer. The air gets trapped down here, and there's no way out. Like gas pockets in a mine. So it just stays here, year after year," I said, unbelievably glad I could talk to her, tell her.

"People used these tube stations as shelters during the Blitz," I said eagerly. "Balham was hit, and so was Charing Cross. That's why you can smell smoke and cordite. Because of the high-explosive bombs. And people were killed by flying tiles at Marble Arch. That's what we're feeling—the winds from those events. They're winds from the past. I don't know what this one was caused by. A tunnel collapse, maybe, or a V-2—" I stopped.

She was looking the way she had sitting on the narrow bed in our hotel room, right before she told me Sara was having an affair.

I stared at her.

"You know what's causing the winds," I said finally. Of course she knew. This was Cath, who knew everything. Cath, who had had twenty years to think about this.

I said, "What's causing them, Cath?"

"Don't—" she said, and looked down the passageway, as if hoping somebody would come, a sudden rush of people, hurrying for the trains, pushing between us, cutting her off before she could answer, but the tunnel remained empty, still, no air moving at all.

"Cath," I said.

She took a deep breath, and then said, "They're what's coming."

"What's *coming*?" I repeated stupidly.

"What's waiting for us," she said, and then, bitterly, "Divorce and death and decay. The ends of things."

"They can't be," I said. "Marble Arch took a direct hit. And Charing Cross—"

But this was Cath, who was always right. And what if the scent wasn't of smoke but of fear, not of ashes but of despair? What if the formaldehyde wasn't the charnelhouse odor of a temporary morgue but of a permanent one, Death itself, the marble arch that waited for us all? No wonder it had reminded Cath of a cemetery.

What if the direct hits, shrapnel flying everywhere, slashing through youth and marriage and happiness, weren't V-2s, but death and devastation and decline?

The winds all, all smelled of death, and the Blitz hardly had a monopoly on that. Look at Hari Srinivasau. And the pub with the great fish and chips.

"But all of the stations where there are winds were hit," I said. "And in Charing Cross there was a smell of water and dirt. It has to be the Blitz."

Cath shook her head. "I've felt them on BART, too."

"But that's in San Francisco. It might be the earthquake. Or the fire."

"And on the Metro in D.C. And once, at home, in the middle of Main Street," she said, staring at the floor. "I think you're right about the inversion layer. It must concentrate them down here, make them stronger and more—"

She paused, and I thought she was going to say "lethal."

"More noticeable," she said.

But I hadn't noticed. Nobody had noticed except Cath, who noticed everything.

And the old, I thought, remembering the white-haired woman in South Kensington Station, her coat collar clutched closed with a blue-veined hand, the stooped old black man on the platform in Holborn. The old feel them all the time, I thought. They walked bent nearly double against a wind that blew all the time.

Or stayed out of the tube. I thought of the Old Man saying, "I *loathe* the Underground." The Old Man, who had run us merrily all over London on the tube after adventure, on at Baker Street and off at Tower Hill, up escalators, down stairs, shouting stories over his shoulder the whole time. "Horrible place," he had said, shuddering, yesterday. "Filthy, smelly, drafty." Drafty.

He felt the winds, and so did Mrs. Hughes. "I never go down in the tube anymore," she had said at dinner. Not, "I never take the tube." I never *go down* in the tube. And it wasn't just the stairs or the long distances she had to walk. It was the winds, reeking of separation and loss and sorrow.

And Cath had to be right. They had to be the winds of mortality. What else would blow so steadily, so inexorably, on the old and no one else?

But then why had I noticed them? Maybe the convention was an inversion layer of another kind, bringing me face-to-face with old friends and old places. With cancer and the Gap and the Old Man, railing about newfangled plays and spicy food. Bringing me face-to-face early with death and old age and change.

And a feeling of time running out, that made you go shoving down escalators and racing through corridors, frantic to catch the train before it pulled out. A feeling of panic, that it might be the last one. "The doors are closing."

I thought of Sara, running up out of Piccadilly Station, her hair windblown, her cheeks unnaturally red, of her pushing past my knees in the theater, desperate, pursued.

"Sara felt them," I said, suddenly understanding.

"Did she?" Cath said, her voice flat.

I looked at her, standing there against the far wall, braced for the next wind, waiting for it to hit.

It was funny. This very passage, this very station had been used as a shelter during the Blitz. But there weren't any shelters that could protect you from this kind of raid.

And no matter what train you caught, no matter which line you took, they all went to the same station. Marble Arch. End of the line.

"So what do we do?" I said.

She didn't answer. She stood there looking at the floor as if it had "Mind the Gap" written on it. Mind the Gap.

"I don't know," she said finally.

And what had I thought she would say? That it wouldn't be so bad as long as we had each other? That love conquers all? That was the whole point, wasn't it, that it didn't? That it was no match for divorce and destruction and death? Look at Milford Hughes Senior. Look at Daniel Drecker's daughter.

"They didn't have my china at any of the shops in Chelsea," she said bleakly. "It never occurred to me it might be discontinued. All those years, I—it never occurred to me it wouldn't still be there." Her voice broke. "It was such a pretty pattern."

And the Old Man was so funny and so full of life, the pub was always jam-packed, Sara and Elliott had a great marriage. But even that couldn't save them. Divorce and destruction and decay.

And what could anybody do about any of it? Button up your overcoat? Stay above-ground?

But that was the problem, staying above-ground. And somehow getting through the days, knowing the doors were closing and it was all going to go smash. Knowing that everything you ever loved or liked or even thought was pretty, was all going to be torn down, burned up, blown away. "Gone with the wind," I said, thinking of the woman on the train.

"What?" Cath said, still in that numb, hopeless voice.

"The novel," I said ruefully. "*Gone With the Wind*. There was a woman on the train to Balham today reading it. When I was tracking down the winds, trying to find out which stations had them, if they were stations that had been hit during the Blitz."

"You went to Balham?" she demanded. "Today?"

"And Blackfriars. And Embankment. And Elephant and Castle. I went to the Transport Museum to find which stations had been hit, and then to Monument and Balham, trying to see if they had winds." I shook my head. "I spent the whole day, trying to figure out the pattern of the—what is it?"

Cath had put her hand up to her mouth as if she were in pain.

"What is it?"

She said, "Sara cancelled again today. After you left. I thought maybe we could have lunch." She looked across at me. "Nobody knew where you were."

"I didn't want anybody to know I was running around London chasing winds nobody else could feel," I said.

"Elliott told me you'd disappeared the day before, too," she said, and there was still something I wasn't getting here. "He said he and Arthur wanted you to have lunch with them, but you left."

"I went back to Holborn, to try to see what was causing the winds. And then to Marble Arch."

"Sara told me she and Elliott had to go take Evers and his wife sightseeing, that they wanted to see Kew Gardens."

"Elliott? I thought you said he was at the conference?"

"He was. He said Sara had a doctor's appointment she'd forgotten about," she said. "Nobody knew where you were. And then at the theater, you and Sara—"

Had shown up together, late, out of breath, Sara's cheeks flaming. And the day before I had lied about lunch, about the afternoon session. To Cath, who could sense when people were lying, who could sense when something was wrong.

"You thought *I* was the one who was having an affair with Sara," I said.

She nodded numbly.

"You thought I was having an affair with *Sara?*" I said. "How could you think that? I *love* you."

"And Sara loved Elliott. People cheat on their spouses, they leave each other. Things . . ."

". . . fall apart," I murmured.

And the air down here registered it all, trapped it below-ground, distilled it into an essence of death and destruction and decay.

Cath was wrong. It was the Blitz, after all. And the girl crying on the train to Balham, and the arguing American couple. Estrangement and disaster and despair. I wondered if it would record this, too, Cath's fear and our unhappiness, and send it blowing through the tunnels and tracks and passages of the tube to hit some poor unsuspecting tourist in the face next week. Or fifty years from now.

I looked at Cath, still standing against the opposite wall, impossibly far away.

"I'm not having an affair with Sara," I said, and Cath leaned weakly against the tiles and started to cry.

"I love you," I said and crossed the passage in one stride and put my arms around her, and for a moment everything was all right. We were together, and safe. Love conquers all.

But only till the next wind—the results of the X-ray, the call in the middle of the night, the surgeon looking down at his hands, not wanting to tell you the bad news. And we were still down in the tube tunnels, still in its direct path.

"Come on," I said, and took her arm. I couldn't protect her from the winds, but I could get her out of the tube tunnels. I could keep her out of the inversion layer. For a few years. Or months. Or minutes.

"Where are we going?" she asked as I propelled her along the passage.

"Up," I said. "Out."

"We're miles from our hotel," she said.

"We'll get a taxi," I said. I led her up the stairs, around a curve, listening as we went for the sound of a train rumbling in, for a tinny voice announcing, "Mind the Gap."

"We'll take taxis exclusively from now on," I said.

Down another passage, down another set of stairs, trying not to hurry, as if hurrying might bring another one on. Through the arch to the escalators. Almost there. Another minute, and I'd have her on the escalator and headed up out of the inversion layer. Out of the wind. Safe for the moment.

A clot of people emerged abruptly from the Circle Line tunnel opposite and jammed up in front of the escalator, chattering in French. Teenagers on holiday, lugging enormous backpacks and a duffel too wide for the escalator steps, stopping, maddeningly, to consult their tube maps at the foot of the escalator.

"Excuse me," I said, "*Pardonnez moi,*" and they looked up, and, instead of moving aside, tried to get on the escalator, jamming the too-wide duffel between the rubber handholds, mashing it down onto the full width of the escalator steps so no one could get past.

Behind us, in the Piccadilly Line tunnel, I could hear the faint sound of a train approaching.

The French kids finally, finally, got the bag onto the escalator, and I pushed Cath onto the bottom step, and stepped on the one below her.

Come on. Up, up. Past a poster for *Remains of the Day* and *Forever, Patsy Cline* and *Death of a Salesman*. Below us, the rumble of the train grew louder, closer.

"What do you say we forget going back to our hotel? We're not far from Marble Arch," I said to cover the sound. "What say we call the Royal Hernia and see if they've got an extra bed?"

Come on, come on. Up. *King Lear. The Mousetrap*.

"What if it's not still there?" Cath said, looking down at the depths below us. We'd come almost three floors. The sound of the train was only a murmur, drowned out by the giggling students and the dull roar of the station hall above us.

"It's still there," I said positively.

Come on, up, up.

"It'll be just like it was," I said. "Steep stairs and the smells of mildew and rotting cabbage. Nice wholesome smells."

"Oh, no," Cath said. She pointed across at the down escalators, suddenly jammed with people in evening dress, shaking the rain from their fur coats and theater programs. "*Cats* just got out. We'll never find a taxi."

"We'll walk," I said.

"It's raining," Cath said.

Better the rain than the wind, I thought. Come on. Up.

We were nearly to the top. The students were already heaving their backpacks onto their shoulders. We would walk to a phone booth and call a taxi. And what then? Keep our heads down. Stay out of drafts. Turn into the Old Man.

It won't work, I thought bleakly. The winds are everywhere. But I had to try to protect Cath from them. Having failed to protect her for the last twenty years, I had to try now to keep her out of their deadly path.

Three steps from the top. The French students were yanking on the wedged duffel, shouting, "*Allons! Allons! Vite!*"

I turned to look back, straining to hear the sound of the train over their voices. And saw the wind catch the gray hair of the old woman just stepping onto the top step of the down escalator. She hunched down, ducking her head as it blew down on her from above. From above! It flipped the hair back from the oblivious young faces of the French students above us, lifted their collars, their shirttails.

"Cath!" I shouted and reached for her with one hand, digging the fingers of my other one into the rubber railing as if I could stop the escalator, keep it from carrying us inexorably forward, forward into its path.

My grabbing for her had knocked her off-balance. She half-fell off her step and into me. I turned her toward me, pulled her against my chest, wrapped my arms around her, but it was too late.

"I love you," Cath said, as if it was her last chance.

"Don't—" I said, but it was already upon us, and there was no protecting her, no stopping it. It hit us full-blast, forcing Cath's hair across her cheeks, blowing us nearly back off the step, hitting me full in the face with its smell. I caught my breath in surprise.

The old lady was still standing poised at the top of the escalator, her head back, her eyes closed. People jammed up behind her, saying irritatedly, "Sorry!" and "May I get past, please!" She didn't hear them. Head tilted back, she sniffed deeply at the air.

"Oh," Cath said, and tilted her head back, too.

I breathed it in deeply. A scent of lilacs and rain and expectation. Of years of tourists reading *London on $40 a Day* and newlyweds holding hands on the platform. Of Elliott and Sara and Cath and I, tumbling laughingly after the Old Man, off the train and through the beckoning passages to the District Line and the Tower of London. The scent of spring and the All-Clear and things to come.

Caught in the winding tunnels along with the despair and the terror and the grief. Caught in the maze of passages and stairs and platforms, trapped and magnified and held in the inversion layer.

We were at the top. "May I get past, please?" the man behind us said.

"We'll find your china, Cath," I said. "There's a second-hand market at Portobello Road that has everything under the sun."

"Does the tube go there?" she said.

"I *beg* your pardon," the man said. "*Sorry*."

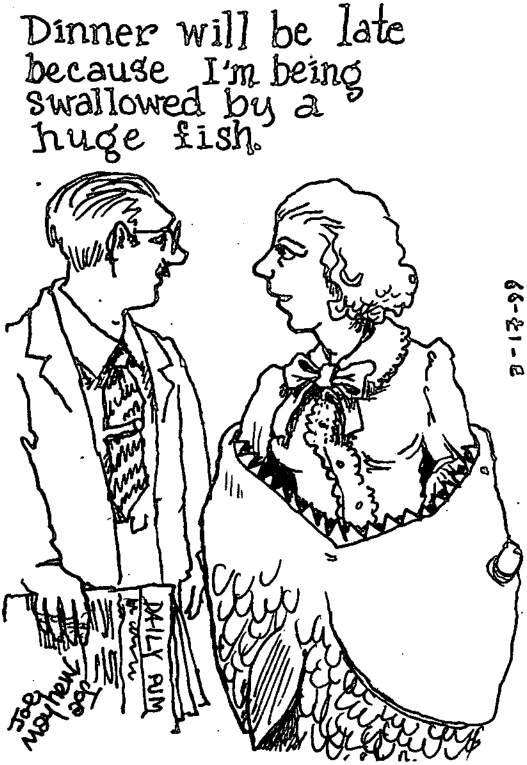
"Ladbroke Grove Station. The Hammersmith and City Line," I said and bent to kiss her.

"You're blocking the way," the man said. "People are trying to get through."

"We're improving the atmosphere," I said and kissed her again.

We stood there a moment, breathing it in—leaves and lilacs and love.

Then we got on the down escalator, holding hands, and went down to the eastbound platform and took the tube to Marble Arch. ○


Dinner will be late because I'm being swallowed by a huge fish.
8-13-99
DAILY RUM
Joe Mayhew 99

THE DREAM WAVE OF JOHN SCOTT RUSSELL

The body is a horse-drawn boat moving up a canal.
In sleep the boat stops, but the
water in the canal doesn't.

Dreaming is involved in memory and learning.

Wake becomes wave, rounded, smooth, well-defined,
unwavering.

Deprive people of their dreams and they don't organize
what they've perceived—they
don't learn.

In August 1834, John Scott Russell, engineer on
horseback, rides beside the Union Canal for miles,
keeping pace with a strange
solitary swell, started when a horse-drawn boat stopped.

Dreaming organizes what has already been perceived;
at times it also organizes what is
yet to be perceived.

The wave is full of tiny, innumerable faces. Phase-locked,
wave-coupled, entranced,
Russell dares not interfere with this channel surge that
refuses to disorganize itself.

A precognitive dream may be regarded as a memory of
what is yet to be.

When a tall, thin example of what Russell calls a
"solitary wave" catches up with a
shorter, fatter variant of the same, the two waves merge
and coalesce completely into
one.

The sleep of dreams is the most fractal. Wake the sleeper
and the wave collapses.

Time disappears in the deep waters behind as the wave
of faces rolls away. Russell
builds a wave tank in his garden, works with barges on
the canal, uses his solitary
waves to correctly calculate the depth of the atmosphere.
He dreams of one day using
solitary waves to determine the size of the universe.

Eventually, the two waves emerge intact, the tall thin
one racing ahead, the short fat one
falling behind, remembering their former organization
through a species of nonlinear
memory.

In the windings of the channel, Russell loses the wave.
The wave, however, never loses
him. Least of all when his horses and boats stop.

—Howard V. Hendrix

Mike Resnick

It's hard to believe it's been almost two years since we last featured a story by Mike Resnick. That tale, "The 43 Antarean Dynasties" (December 1997), went on to win the Hugo award for best short story. Eleven of the author's sixteen other *Asimov's* stories have also been Hugo finalists. Fortunately, the wait for his next tale is short. Mr. Resnick's new novella, "Hunting the Snark," will be December's cover story. In his latest tale, he shows us that while it may take a lot of work to get hothouse flowers to bloom, once you've perfected the system, they can live forever and ever and ever . . .

HOTHOUSE FLOWERS

I test the temperature. It is 83 degrees, warm but not hot. Just right.

I spend the next hour puttering around, checking medications, adjusting the humidity, cleaning one of the life stations. Then Superintendent Bailey stops by on his way out to dinner.

"How are your charges doing?" he asks. "Any problems today?"

"No, sir, everything's fine," I answer.

"Good," he says. "We wouldn't want any problems, especially not with the celebration coming up."

The celebration is the turn of the century, although there is some debate about that, because we are all preparing to celebrate the instant the clock hits midnight and A.D. 2200 begins, but some spoilsport scientists (or maybe they're mathematicians) have told the press that the new century *really* begins a year later, when we enter 2201.

Not that my charges know the difference, but I'm glad we're celebrating it this year, because it means that we'll decorate the place with bright colors—and if we like it, why, we'll do it again in 2201.

I have been married to Felicia for seventeen years, and I hardly ever regret it. She was a little bit pudgy when we met, and she has gotten pudgier over the years so that now she is honest-to-goodness fat and there is simply no other word for it. Her hair, which used to be brown, is streaked with gray now, and she's lost whatever physical grace she once had. But she is a good life partner. Her taste in holos is similar to mine, so we almost never fight about what to watch after dinner, and of course we both love our work.

As we eat dinner, the topic turns to our gardens, as always.

"I'm worried about Rex," she confides.

Rex is *Begonia rex,* her hanging basket.

"Oh?" I say. "What's wrong with him?"

She shakes her head in puzzlement. "I don't know. Perhaps I've been letting him get *too* much sun. His leaves are yellowing, and his roots could be in better shape."

"Have you spoken to one of the botanists?"

"No. They're totally absorbed in cloning that new species of *Aglaonema crispum.*"

"Still?"

She shrugs. "They say it's important."

"The damned plant's been around for centuries," I say. "I can't see what's so important about it."

"I told you: they engineered an exciting mutation. It actually glows in the dark, as if it's been dusted with phosphorescent silver paint."

"It's not going to put the energy company out of business."

"I know. But it's important to *them.*"

"It seems unfair," I say for the hundredth, or maybe the thousandth, time. "They get all the fame and money for creating a new species, and you get paid the same old salary for keeping it alive."

"I don't mind," she replies. "I love my work. I don't know what I'd do without my greenhouse."

"I know," I say soothingly. "I feel the same way."

"So how is *your* Rex today?" she asks.

It's my turn to shrug. "About the same as usual." Suddenly I laugh.

"What's so funny?" asks Felicia.

"You think your Rex is getting too much sun. I decided *my* Rex wasn't getting enough, so this afternoon I moved him closer to a window."

"Will it make a difference, do you think?" she asks.

I sigh deeply. "Does it ever?"

I walk up to the major and smile at him. "How are we today?" I ask.

The major looks at me through unfocused eyes. There is a little drool running out the side of his mouth, and I wipe it off.

"It's a lovely morning," I say. "It's a pity you can't be outside to enjoy it." I pause, waiting for the reaction that never comes. "Still," I continue, "you've seen more than your share of them, so missing a few won't hurt." I check the screen at his life station, find his birthdate, and dope it out. "Well, I'll be damned! You've actually seen 60,573 mornings!"

Of course, he's been here for almost half of them: 29,882 to be exact. If he ever did count them, he stopped a long time ago.

I clean and sterilize his feeding tubes and his medication tubes and his breathing tubes, examine him for bedsores, wash him, take his temperature and blood pressure, and check to make sure his cholesterol hasn't gone above the 350 level. (They want it lower, of course, but he can't exercise and they've been feeding him intravenously for more than half a century, so they won't do anything about changing his diet. After all, it hasn't killed him so far, and altering it just might do so.)

I elevate his withered body just long enough to change the bedding, then gently lower him back down. (That used to take ten minutes, and at least one helper, before they developed the anti-grav beam. Now it's just a matter of a few seconds, and I like to think it causes less discomfort, though of course the major is in no condition to tell me.)

Then it's on to Rex. Felicia has problems with her Rex, and I have problems with mine.

"Good morning, Rex," I say.

He mumbles something incomprehensible at me.

I look down at him. His right eye is bloodshot and tearing heavily.

"Rex, what am I going to do with you?" I say. "You know you're not supposed to stare at the sun."

He doesn't really know it. I doubt that he even knows his name is Rex. But cleansing his eye and medicating it is going to put me behind schedule, and I have to blame *someone.* Rex doesn't mind being blamed. He doesn't mind burning out his retina. He doesn't even mind lying motionless for decades. If there is anything he *does* mind, nobody's found it yet.

I spill some medication on him while fixing his eye, so I decide that rather than just change his diaper I might as well go all the way and give him a DryChem bath. I marvel, as always, at the sheer number of surgical scars that criss-cross his torso: the first new heart, the second, the new kidneys, the new spleen, the new left lung. There's a tiny, ancient scar on his lower belly that I think was from the removal of a burst appendix, but I can't find any record of it on the computer and he's been past talking about it for almost a century.

Then I move on to Mr. Spinoza. He's lying there, mouth agape, eyes open, head at an awkward angle. I can tell even before I reach him that he's not breathing. My first inclination is to call Emergency, but I realize that his life station will have reported his condition already, and sure enough, just seconds later the Resurrection Team arrives and sets up a curtain around him (as if any of his roommates could see or care), and within ten minutes they've got the old gentleman going again.

This is the fifth time Mr. Spinoza has died this year. All this dying has to be hard on his system, and I worry that one of these days it's going to be permanent.

"So how was your major today?" asks Felicia at dinner.

"Same as usual," I say. "How's yours?"

Her major is the *Browallia speciosa majorus*. "Ditto," she says. "Old, but hanging on." She frowns. "We may not get any blossoms this year, though. The roots are a little ropey."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"It happens." She pauses. "How was the rest of your day?"

"We had some excitement," I reply.

"Oh?"

"Mr. Spinoza died again."

"That's the fourth time, isn't it?" she asks.

"The fifth," I correct her. "The Resurrection Team revived him."

"The Resuscitation Team," she corrects me.

"You have your word for them, I have mine," I say. "Mine's better. Resurrection is what they do."

"So you've only lost one this week," says Felicia, if not changing the subject at least moving on a tangent away from it.

"Right. Mr. Lazlo. He was 193 years old."

"One hundred and ninety-three," she muses, and then shrugs. "I guess he was entitled."

"You mentioned that you lost one too," I note.

"My *cymbidium*."

"That's an orchid, right?" I say. "The one they nicknamed Peter Pan?"

She nods.

"Silly name for an orchid," I remark.

"It stayed young forever, or so it seemed," she replies. "It had the most exquisite blooms. I'm really going to miss it. I'd had it for almost twenty years." She smiles sadly, and a single tear begins to roll down her cheek. "I worked so hard over it, sometimes I felt like its mother." She looks at me. "That sounds ludicrous, doesn't it?"

"Not at all," I say, sincerely touched by her grief.

"It's all right," she says. Then she stares at my face. "Don't be so concerned. It was just a flower."

"It's called empathy," I answer, and she lets it drop . . . but I *am* troubled, and by the oddest thought: *Shouldn't I feel worse about losing a person than she feels about losing an orchid?*

But I don't.

I don't know when it began. Probably with the first caveman who made a sling for a broken arm, or forced water out of a drowned companion's lungs. But somewhere back in the dim and distant past man invented medicine. It had its good centuries and its bad centuries, but by the end of the last millennium it was curing so many diseases and extending so many lives that things got out of hand.

More than half the people who were alive in 2050 were still alive in 2150. And almost 90 percent of the people who were alive in 2100 will be alive in

2200. Medical science had doubled and then trebled man's life span. Immortality was within our grasp. Life everlasting beckoned.

We were so busy increasing the length of life that no one gave much thought to the *quality* of those extended lives.

And then we woke up one day to find that there were a lot more of them than there were of us.

His name is Bernard Goldmeier. They carry him in on an airsled, then transfer him to Mr. Lazlo's old life station.

After I clean the major's tubes and change his bedding and medicate Rex's eye, I call up Mr. Goldmeier's medical history on the holoscreen at his life station.

"This place stinks!" rasps a dry voice.

I jump, startled, then turn to see who spoke. There is no one in the room except me and my charges.

"Who said that?" I demand.

"I did," replies Mr. Goldmeier.

I look closely at him. The skin hangs loose and brown-spotted on his bald head. His cheeks are covered by miscolored flesh and his nose has oxygen tubes inserted into it—but his eyes, sunken deep in his head, are clear and he is staring at me.

"You really spoke!" I exclaim.

"You never heard an inmate speak before?"

"Not that I remember."

Which is another unhappy truth. By age hundred, one out of every two people has some form of senile dementia. By one hundred and twenty-five, it's four out of five. By one hundred and fifty, it's ninety-nine out of one hundred. Mr. Goldmeier is one hundred and fifty-three years old; the odds against his retaining anything close to normal mental capacities are better than a hundred to one.

"I should add," I say, "that the proper term is 'charge,' not 'patient' and certainly not 'inmate.'"

"A zombie by any other name . . ."

I decide there is no sense arguing with him. "How do you feel?" I ask.

"Look at me," he says disgustedly. "How would *you* feel?"

"If you're in any discomfort . . ." I begin.

"I told you: this place stinks. It reeks of shit and urine."

"Some of our charges are incontinent," I explain. "We have to show them understanding and compassion."

"Why?" he rasps. "What do they show us in exchange?"

"Try to be a little more tolerant," I say.

"*You* try!" he snaps. "I'm busy!"

I can't help but ask: "Busy doing what?"

"Hanging onto reality!"

I smile. "Is that so difficult?"

"Why don't you ask some of your other inmates?" He sniffs the air and makes a face. "Goddamnit! Another one's crapping all over himself! What the hell am I doing here anyway? I'm not a fucking vegetable yet!"

I check all the notations on the screen.

"You're here, Mr. Goldmeier," I say, not without some satisfaction at what I'm about to tell him, "because no other ward will have you. You've offended every attendant and orderly in the entire complex."

"Where do I go when I offend you?"

"This is your last stop. You're here for better or worse."

Lucky me. I turn back to the holoscreen and begin punching in the standard questions.

"What are you doing now?" he demands. He tries to boost himself up on a scrawny, miscolored elbow to watch me, but he's too weak.

"Checking to see if I'm to medicate you for any diseases," I reply.

"I haven't been out of bed in forty years," he rasps. "If I have a disease, I got it from one of you goons."

I ignore his answer and continue staring at the screen. "You have a history of cancer."

"Big deal," he says. "As quick as I get it, you bastards cure it." He pauses. "Seventeen cancers. You cut five out, burned three out, and drowned the other nine in your chemicals."

I keep reading the screen. "I see you still have your original heart," I note with some surprise. Most hearts are replaced by the time the patient is 120 years old, the lungs and kidneys even sooner.

"Are you offering me yours?" he says sarcastically.

Okay, so he's an arrogant, hostile bastard—but he's also my only charge who's capable of speech, so I force a smile and try again.

"You're a lucky man," I begin.

He glares at me. "You want to explain that?"

"You've retained your mental acuity. Very few manage that at your advanced age."

"And you think that's lucky, do you?"

"Certainly."

"Then you're a fool," said Mr. Goldmeier.

I sigh. "I'm trying very hard to be your friend. You're not making it easy."

His emaciated face contracts in a look of disgust. "Why in hell should you want to be my friend?"

"I want to be friends with all my charges."

"*Them?*" he says contemptuously, scanning the room. "You'd probably get more action from a bunch of potted plants." It's not dissimilar from what Felicia says on occasion.

"Look," I say. "You're going to be here for a very long time. So am I. Why don't we at least try to cultivate the illusion of civility?"

"That's a disgusting thought."

"Being civil?" I ask, wondering what kind of creature they have delivered to my ward.

"That too," he says. "But I meant being here for a very long time." He exhales deeply, and I hear a rattling in his chest and make a mental note to tell the doctors about his congestion. Then he adds: "Being *anywhere* for a very long time."

"What makes you so bitter?" I ask.

"I've seen terrible things, things no man should ever have to see."

"We've had our share," I agree. "The war with Brazil. The meteor that hit Mozambique. The revolution in Canada."

"Fool!" he snaps. "Those were *diversions*."

"Diversions?" I repeat incredulously. "Just what hellholes have you been to?"

"The worst," he answers. "I've been to places where men begged for death, and slowly went mad when it didn't come."

"I don't remember reading or hearing about anything like that," I say. "Where was this?"

He stares unblinking at me for a long moment before he answers. "Right here, in the wards."

Felicia looks up from her plate. "His name's Bernard Goldmeier?" she says.

"That's right."

"I don't have any Bernards," she says. "It's not the kind of name they give to flowers."

"It doesn't matter."

Suddenly her face brightens. "I do have a gold flower, though—a *Mesembryanthemum criniflorum*. I can call it Goldie, or even Goldmeier."

"It's not important."

"But it is," she insists. "For years it's been how we compare our days." She smiles. "It makes me feel closer to you, caring for flowers with the same names."

"Fine," I say. "Call it whatever you want."

"You seem"—she searches for the word— "upset."

"He troubles me."

"Oh? Why?"

"I love my work," I begin.

"I know you do."

"And it's meaningful work," I continue, trying to keep the resentment from my voice. "Maybe I'm not a doctor, but I stand guard over them and hold Death at bay. That's important, isn't it?"

"Of course it is," she says soothingly.

"He belittles it."

"That doesn't mean a thing," says Felicia, reaching across the table and taking my hand. "You know how they get when they're that old."

Yes, I know how they get. But he's not like them. He sounds—I don't know—normal, like me; that's the upsetting part.

"He doesn't seem irrational," I say aloud. "Just bitter."

"Enough bitterness will make anyone irrational."

"I know," I say. "But . . ."

"But what?"

"Well, it's going to sound juvenile and selfish . . ."

"You're the least selfish man I know," says Felicia. "Tell me what's bothering you."

"It's just that . . . well, I always thought that if my charges could speak to me, they'd tell me how grateful they were, how much my efforts meant to them." I pause and think about it. "Does that make me selfish?"

"Certainly not," she replies. "I think they *ought* to be grateful." She pats my hand. "A lot of people in that place are just earning salaries; you're there because you care."

"Anyway, here I've finally got someone who *could* thank me, could tell me that I'm appreciated, and instead he's furious because I'm going to do everything within my power to keep him alive."

She coos and purrs and makes soothing noises, but she doesn't actually *say* anything, and finally I change the subject and ask her about her garden. A moment later she is rapturously describing the new buds on the *Aphelandra squarrosa,* and telling me that she thinks she will have to divide the *Scilla sibirica,* and I listen gratefully and do not think about Mr. Goldmeier, lying motionless in his bed and cursing the darkness, until I arrive at work in the morning.

"Are you feeling any better today?" I ask as I approach Mr. Goldmeier's life station.

"No, I'm not feeling better today," he says nastily. "God's fresh out of miracles."

"Are you at least adjusting to your new surroundings?"

"Hell, no."

"You will."

"I damned well better not!"

I stare at him. "You're not leaving here."

"I know."

"Then you might as well get used to the place."

"Never!"

"I don't understand you at all," I say.

"That's because you're a fool!" he snaps. "Look at me! I have no money and no family. I can't feed myself or even sit up."

"That's no reason to be so hostile," I say placatingly. I am about to tell him that his condition is no different from most of my charges, but he speaks first.

"All I have left is my rage. I won't let you take it away; it's all that separates me from the vegetables here."

I look at him and shake my head sadly. "I don't know what made you like this."

"One hundred and fifty-three years made me like this," he says.

I continue staring at him, at the atrophied legs that will never walk again, at the shriveled arms and skeletal fingers, at the deathmask skull with its burning, sunken eyes, and I think: *Maybe—just maybe—senility is Nature's way of making life in such a body tolerable. Maybe you're not as lucky as I thought.*

The major's chin is wet with drool, and I walk over to him and wipe it off.

"There," I say. "Clean as a whistle."

Okay, I think, staring down at him. *You're not grateful, but at least you don't hate me for doing what you can no longer do for yourself. Why can't they all be like you?*

"Why don't you ask for a transfer to another ward if he's bothering you that much?" asks Felicia.

"What would I say?" I reply. "That this old man who can't even roll over without help is driving me away?"

"Just tell them you want a change."

I shake my head. "My work is important to me. My *charges* are important to me. I can't turn my back on them just because he makes my life miserable."

"Maybe you should sit down and figure out *why* he upsets you."

"He makes me think uncomfortable thoughts."

"What kind of uncomfortable thoughts?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I reply. But what I really mean is: *I don't want to think about it.*

I just wish I could get my brain to listen to me.

* * *

Superintendent Bailey enters the ward and approaches me.

"I'm going to need you to work a little overtime today," he informs me.

"Oh?" I reply. "What's the problem?"

"There must be some virus going around," he says. "A third of the staff has called in sick."

"All right. I'll just have to let Felicia know I'll be late for dinner. Where do you want me to go when I'm through here?"

"Ward 87."

"Isn't that a women's ward?" I ask.

"Yes."

"I'd rather have a different assignment, sir."

"And I'd rather have a full staff!" he snaps. "We're both doomed to be disappointed today."

He turns and leaves the ward.

"What have you got against women?" croaks Mr. Goldmeier. I had thought he was asleep, but he's been lying there, motionless, with his eyes (and his ears) wide open.

"Nothing," I answer. "I just don't think I should bathe them."

"Why the hell not?"

"It's a matter of respecting their dignity."

"Their dignity?" he snorts derisively.

"Their modesty, if you prefer."

"Dignity? Modesty? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"They're human beings," I answer with dignity of my own.

"Not any more," he replies contemptuously. "They're a bunch of vegetables that don't give a damn who bathes them." He closes his eyes. "You're a blind, sentimental fool."

I hate it when he says things like that, because I want to explain that I am *not* a blind, sentimental fool. But that requires me to prove he is wrong, and I can't—I've tried.

All human beings have modesty and dignity. If they haven't any, then they're not human beings any more—and if they're not human beings, why are we keeping them alive? Therefore, they *must* have modesty and dignity.

Then I think of those shriveled bodies and atrophied limbs and uncomprehending eyes, and I start getting another migraine.

Two days have passed, and I am not eating or sleeping any better than Mr. Goldmeier.

"What did he say this time?" says Felicia wearily, staring across the dining room table at me.

"I'm not sure," I answer. "He kept talking about youth in Asia, so finally I looked them up in the encyclopedia. All it says is that there are a lot of them and they're starving." I pause, frowning. "But as far as I can tell, he's never been to Asia. I don't know why he kept talking about them."

"Who knows?" says Felicia with a shrug. "He's an old man. They don't always make sense."

"He makes *too* goddamned much sense," I mutter bitterly.

"Could you have misunderstood the words?" she asks. "Old men mumble a lot."

"I doubt it. I understand everything else he says, so why not this?"

"Let's find out for sure," she says, activating the dining room computer.

It glows with life. "Computer, find synonyms for the term 'youth in Asia.'"

The computer begins rattling them off. "Young people in Asia. Adolescents in Asia. Children in Asia. Teenagers in—"

"Stop!" commands Felicia. "Synonym was the wrong term. Computer, are there any homonyms for the term youth in Asia?"

"A homonym is an exact match," answers the computer, "and there is no exact match."

"Are there any close approximations?"

"One. The word euthanasia."

"Ah," says Felicia triumphantly. "And what does it mean?"

"It is an archaic word, no longer in use. I can find no definition of it in my memory bank."

"Eu-tha-na-sia," says Mr. Goldmeier, articulating each syllable. "How the hell can the dictionaries and encyclopedias not list it any longer?"

"They list it," I explain. "They just don't define it."

"Figures," he says disgustedly. As I wait patiently for him to tell me what the word means, he changes the subject. "How long have you worked here?"

"Almost fourteen years."

"Seen a lot of patients come and go?"

"Of course I have."

"Where do they go when they leave here?"

"They don't, except when they're transferred to another ward."

"So they come to this place, and then they die?"

"You make it sound like it happens overnight," I reply. "We've kept some of them alive for more than a century," I add proudly. "A *lot* of them, in fact."

He stares at me. I recognize that particular stare; it means I'm not going to like what he says next.

"You could save a lot of time and effort by killing them right away."

"That would be contrary to civil and moral law!" I reply angrily. "It's our job to keep every patient alive."

"Have you ever asked them if they *want* to be kept alive?"

"No one wants to die."

"Right. It's against all civil and moral law." He coughs and tries to clear his lungs. "Well, that's why you won't find it in the dictionary."

"Find what?" I ask, confused.

"*Euthanasia,*" he says.

"I don't understand you."

"That's what we were talking about, isn't it?" he says. "It means mercy killing."

"Mercy killing?"

"You've heard both words before. Figure it out."

I am still wondering why anyone would think it was merciful to kill another human being when my shift ends and I go home.

"Why would someone want to die?" I ask Felicia.

She rolls her eyes. "Goldmeier again?"

"Yes."

"Somehow I'm not surprised," she says in annoyed tones. She shakes her head sadly. "I don't know where that man gets his ideas. No one wants to die." She pauses. "Look at it logically. If someone's in pain, he can go on medication. If he's lost a limb, he can get a prosthesis. If he's too feeble even to feed himself—well, that's what trained people like you are there for."

"What if he's just tired of living?"

"You know better than that," replied Felicia with unshakeable certainty. "Every living organism fights to stay alive. That's the first law of Nature."

"Yes, I suppose so," I agree.

"He's a nasty old man. Did he say anything else?"

"No, not really." I toy with my food. Somehow my appetite has vanished. "How were things at the greenhouse?"

"They finally got exactly the shade of phosphorescent silver they want for the *Aglaonema crispum,*" she says. "I think they're going to call it the 'Silver Charm.'"

"Cute name."

"Yes, I rather like it. They tell me there was once a famous racehorse, centuries ago, with that name." She pauses. "Of course, it means some extra work for me."

"Potting them?"

"They're all potted. No, the problem is making room for them. I think we'll have to get rid of the *Browallia speciosa majorus.*"

"But those are your majors!" I protest. "I know how you love them!"

"I do," she admits. "They have exquisite blossoms. But they've got some kind of exotic root rot disease." She sighs deeply. "I saw some discoloration, some slimy residue . . . but I didn't identify it in time. It's my fault they're dying."

"Why not bring them home?" I suggest.

"If you want majors, I'll bring some young, healthy ones that will flower in the spring. But I'm just going to dump the old ones in the garbage. The disease won."

I'm grasping for something, but I'm not quite sure what. "Didn't you just tell me that every living thing fights to stay alive?"

"The majors don't want to die," said Felicia. "They're infected, so I'm taking that decision out of their hands before the disease can spread to other plants."

"But if—"

"Don't go getting philosophical with me," she says. "They're only flowers. It's not as if they feel any pain."

Later that night I find myself wondering when was the last time Rex or the major or Mr. Spinoza or any of the others felt any pain.

Fifty years? Seventy-five? A hundred? More?

Then I realize that that's what Mr. Goldmeier *wants* me to think. He sees the weak and he wants them dead.

But they're not his targets at all. They never were.

I finally know who he is trying to infect.

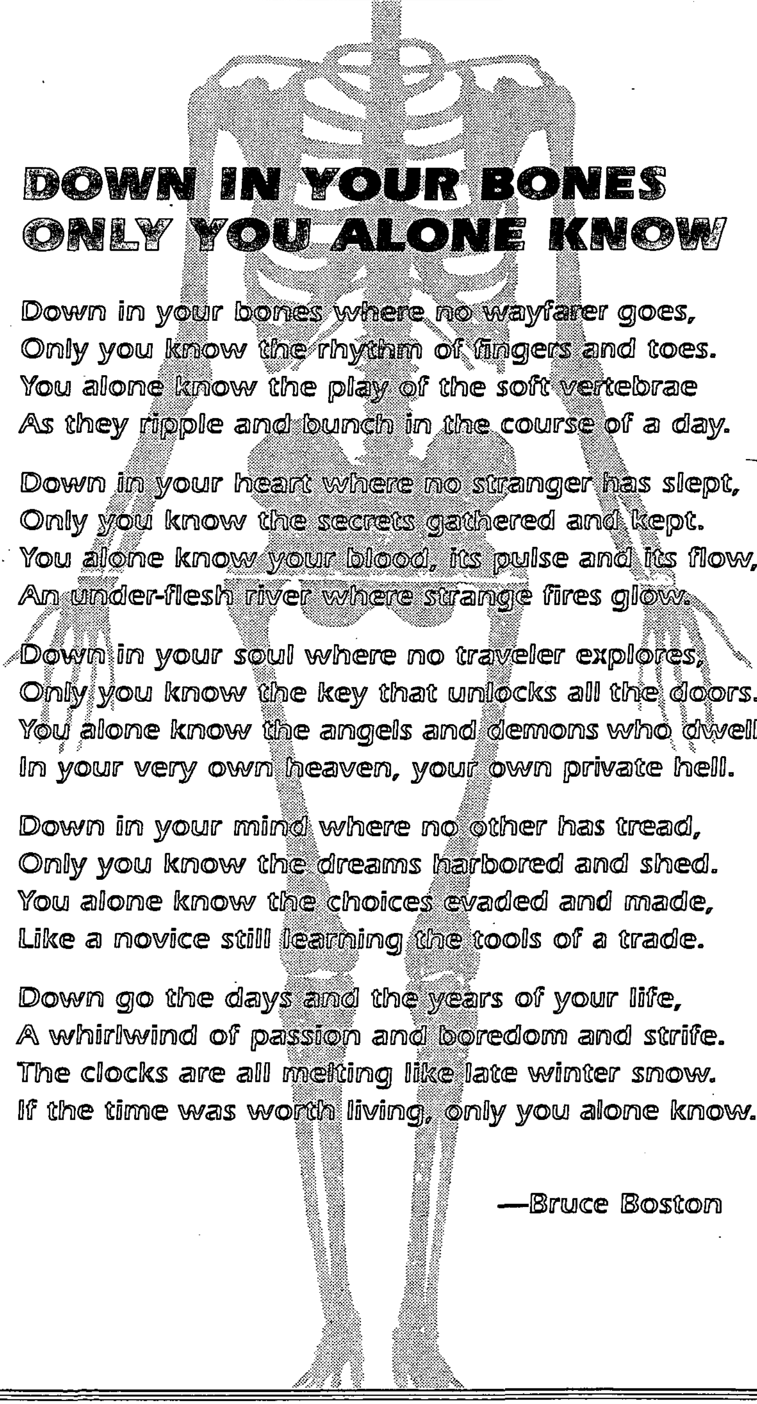
I show up early for work and enter my ward. Everyone is sleeping.

I look at my charges, and a warm glow comes over me. *We are a team, you and I. I give you life and you give me satisfaction and a sense of purpose. I pledge to you that I will never let anyone destroy the bond between us.*

When I think about it, there is really very little difference between Felicia's job and my own. She has to protect her flowers; I have to protect mine.

I fill a syringe and walk silently over to Mr. Goldmeier's life station.

It is time to start weeding my garden. ○



DOWN IN YOUR BONES ONLY YOU ALONE KNOW

Down in your bones where no wayfarer goes,
Only you know the rhythm of fingers and toes.
You alone know the play of the soft vertebrae
As they ripple and bunch in the course of a day.

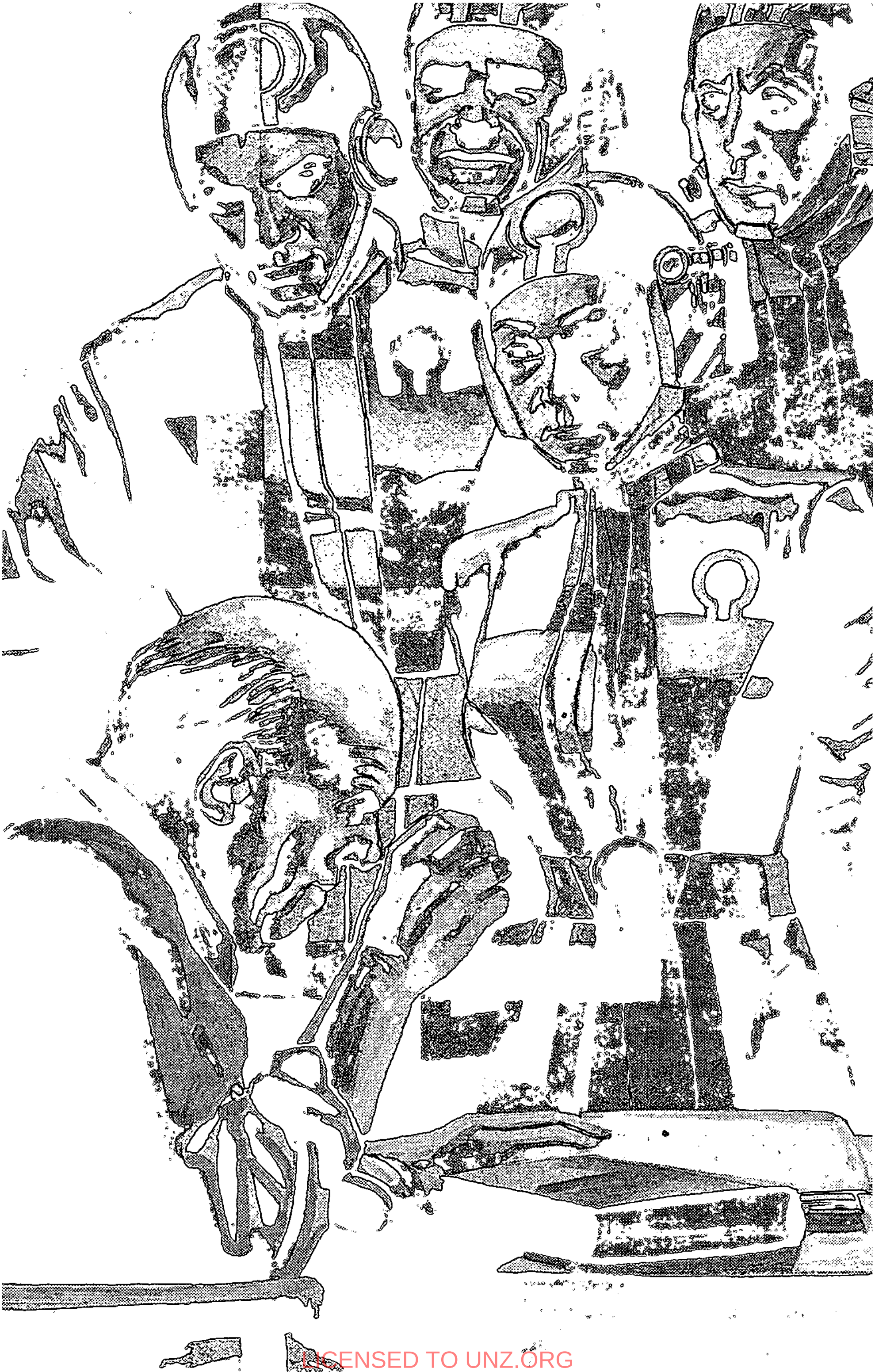
Down in your heart where no stranger has slept,
Only you know the secrets gathered and kept.
You alone know your blood, its pulse and its flow,
An under-flesh river where strange fires glow.

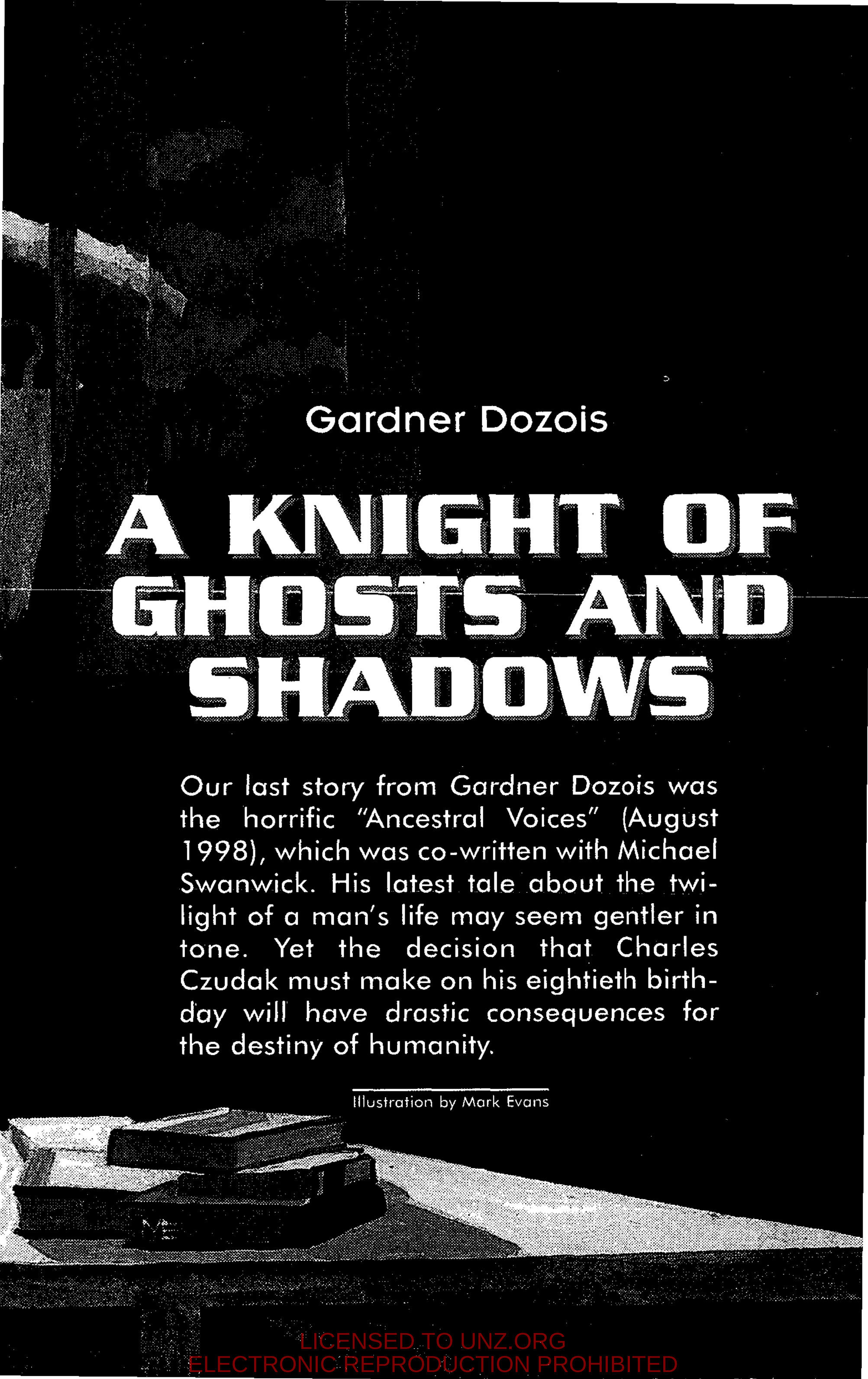
Down in your soul where no traveler explores,
Only you know the key that unlocks all the doors.
You alone know the angels and demons who dwell
In your very own heaven, your own private hell.

Down in your mind where no other has tread,
Only you know the dreams harbored and shed.
You alone know the choices evaded and made,
Like a novice still learning the tools of a trade.

Down go the days and the years of your life,
A whirlwind of passion and boredom and strife.
The clocks are all melting like late winter snow.
If the time was worth living, only you alone know.

—Bruce Boston





Gardner Dozois

A KNIGHT OF GHOSTS AND SHADOWS

Our last story from Gardner Dozois was the horrific "Ancestral Voices" (August 1998), which was co-written with Michael Swanwick. His latest tale about the twilight of a man's life may seem gentler in tone. Yet the decision that Charles Czudak must make on his eightieth birthday will have drastic consequences for the destiny of humanity.

Illustration by Mark Evans

Sometimes the old man was visited by time-travelers.

He would be alone in the house, perhaps sitting at his massive old wooden desk with a book or some of the notes he endlessly shuffled through, the shadows of the room cavernous around him. It would be the very bottom of the evening, that flat timeless moment between the guttering of one day and the quickening of the next when the sky is neither black nor gray, nothing moves, and the night beyond the window glass is as cold and bitter and dead as the dregs of yesterday's coffee. At such a time, if he would pause in his work to listen, he would become intensely aware of the ancient brownstone building around him, smelling of plaster and wood and wax and old dust, imbued with the kind of dense humming silence that is made of many small sounds not quite heard. He would listen to the silence until his nerves were stretched through the building like miles of fine silver wire, and then, as the shadows closed in like iron and the light itself would seem to grow smoky and dim, the time-travelers would arrive.

He couldn't see them or hear them, but in they would come, the time-travelers, filing into the house, filling up the shadows, spreading through the room like smoke. He would feel them around him as he worked, crowding close to the desk, looking over his shoulder. He wasn't afraid of them. There was no menace in them, no chill of evil or the uncanny—only the feeling that they were *there* with him, watching him patiently, interestedly, without malice. He fancied them as groups of ghostly tourists from the far future, *here we see a twenty-first century man in his natural habitat, notice the details of gross corporeality, please do not interphase anything*, clicking some future equivalent of cameras at him, how quaint, murmuring appreciatively to each other in almost-audible mothwing voices, discorporate Gray Line tours from a millennium hence slumming in the darker centuries.

Sometimes he would nod affably to them as they came in, neighbor to neighbor across the vast gulfs of time, and then he would smile at himself, and mutter "Senile dementia!" They would stay with him for the rest of the night, looking on while he worked, following him into the bathroom—*see, see!*—and trailing around the house after him wherever he went. They were as much company as a cat—he'd always had cats, but now he was too old, too near the end of his life; a sin to leave a pet behind, deserted, when he died—and he didn't even have to feed them. He resisted the temptation to talk aloud to them, afraid that they might talk *back,* and then he would either have to take them seriously as an actual phenomenon or admit that they were just a symptom of his mind going at last, another milestone on his long, slow fall into death. Occasionally, if he was feeling particularly fey, he would allow himself the luxury of turning in the door on his way in to bed and wishing the following shadows a hearty goodnight. They never answered.

Then the house would be still, heavy with silence and sleep, and they would watch on through the dark.

That night there had been more time-travelers than usual, it seemed, a jostling crowd of ghosts and shadows, and now, this morning, August the fifth, the old man slept fitfully.

He rolled and muttered in his sleep, at the bottom of a pool of shadow, and the labored sound of his breathing echoed from the bare walls. The first cold light of dawn was just spreading across the ceiling, raw and blue, like a fresh coat of paint covering the midden layers of the past, twenty or thirty coats since the room was new, white, brown, tan, showing through here and there in spots and tatters. The rest of the room was deep in shadow, with only the tallest pieces of furniture—the tops of the dresser and the bureau, and the upper half of the bed's headboard—rising up from the gloom like mountain peaks that catch the first light from the edge of the world. Touched by that light, the ceiling was hard-edged and sharp-lined and clear, ruled by the uncompromising reality of day; down below, in the shadows where the old man slept, everything was still dissolved in the sly, indiscriminate, and ambivalent ocean of the night, where things melt and intermingle, change their shapes and their natures, flow outside the bounds. Sunk in the gray half-light, the man on the bed was only a doughy manikin shape, a preliminary charcoal sketch of a man, all chiaroscuro and planes and pools of shadow, and the motion of his head as it turned fretfully on the pillow was no more than a stirring of murky darkness, like mud roiling in water. Above, the light spread and deepened, turning into gold. Now night was going out like the tide, flowing away under the door and puddling under furniture and in far corners, leaving more and more of the room beached hard-edged and dry above its high-water line. Gold changed to brilliant white. The receding darkness uncovered the old man's face, and light fell across it.

The old man's name was Charles Czudak, and he had once been an important man, or at least a famous one.

He was eighty years old today.

His eyes opened.

The first thing that Charles Czudak saw that morning was the clear white light that shook and shimmered on the ceiling, and for a moment he thought that he was back in that horrible night when they nuked Brooklyn. He cried out and flinched away, throwing up an arm to shield his eyes, and then, as he came fully awake, he realized when he was, and that the light gleaming above signified nothing more than that he'd somehow lived to see the start of another day. He relaxed slowly, feeling his heart race.

Stupid old man, dreaming stupid old man's dreams!

That was the way it had been, though, that night. He'd been living in a rundown Trinity house across Philadelphia at 20th and Walnut then, rather than in this more luxurious old brownstone on Spruce Street near Washington Square, and he'd finished making love to Ellen barely ten minutes before (what a ghastly irony it would have been, he'd often thought since, if the Big Bang had actually come *while* they were fucking! What a moment of dislocation and confusion *that* would have produced!), and they were lying in each other's sweat and the coppery smell of sex in the rumpled bed, listening to a car radio playing outside somewhere, a baby crying somewhere else, the buzz of flies and mosquitoes at the screens, a mellow night breeze moving across their drying skins, and then the sudden searing glare had leaped across the ceiling, turning everything white. An intense, almost supernatural silence had followed, as though the universe had taken a very deep breath and held it. Incongruously, through that moments of silence, they could hear the toilet flushing in the apartment upstairs, and water pipes knocking and rattling all the way down the length of the building. For several minutes, they lay silently in each others arms, waiting, listening, frightened, hoping that the flare of light was anything other than it seemed to be. Then the universe let out that deep breath, and the windows exploded inward in geysers of shattered glass, and the building groaned and staggered and bucked, and heat lashed them like a whip of gold. His heart hammering at the base of his throat like a fist from inside, and Ellen crying in his arms, them clinging to each other in the midst of the roaring nightmare chaos, clinging to each other as though they would be swirled away and drowned if they did not.

That had been almost sixty years ago, that terrible night, and if the Brooklyn bomb that had slipped through the particle-beam defenses had been any more potent than a small clean tac, or had come down closer than Prospect Park, he wouldn't be alive today. It was strange to have lived through the nuclear war that so many people had feared for so long, right through the last half of the twentieth century and into the opening years of the twenty-first—but it was stranger still to have lived through it and *kept on going,* while the war slipped away behind into history, to become something that happened a very long time ago, a detail to be read about by bored schoolchildren who would not even have been born until Armageddon was already safely fifty years in the past.

In fact, he had outlived most of his world. The society into which he'd been born no longer existed; it was as dead as the Victorian age, relegated to antique shops and dusty photo albums and dustier memories, the source of quaint old photos and quainter old videos (you could get a laugh today just by *saying* "MTV"), and here he still was somehow, almost everyone he'd ever known either dead or gone, alone in THE FUTURE. Ah, Brave New World, that has such creatures in it! How many times had he dreamed of being here, as a young child sunk in the doldrums of the '80s, at the frayed, tattered end of a worn-out century? Really, he deserved it; it served him right that his wish had come true, and that he had lived to see the marvels of THE FUTURE with his own eyes. Of course, nothing had turned out to be much like he'd thought it would be, even World War III—but then, he had come to realize that nothing ever did.

The sunlight was growing hot on his face, it was certainly time to get up, but there was something he should remember, something about today. He couldn't bring it to mind, and instead found himself staring at the ceiling, tracing the tiny cracks in plaster that seemed like dry riverbeds stitching across a fossil world—arid Mars upside-down up there, complete with tiny pockmark craters and paintblob mountains and wide dead leakstain seas, and he hanging above it all like a dying gray god, ancient and corroded and vast.

Someone shouted in the street below, the first living sound of the day. Further away, a dog barked.

He swung himself up and sat stiffly on the edge of the bed. Released from his weight, the mattress began to work itself back to level. Generations of people had loved and slept and given birth and died on that bed, leaving no trace of themselves other than the faint, matted-down impressions made by their bodies. What had happened to them, the once-alive who had darted unheeded through life like shoals of tiny bright fish in some strange aquarium? They were gone, vanished without memory; they had settled to the bottom of the tank, along with the other anonymous sediments of the world. They were sludge now, detritus. Gone. They had not affected anything in life, and their going changed nothing. It made no difference that they had ever lived at all, and soon no one would remember that they ever had. And it would be the same with him. When he was gone, the dent in the mattress would be worn a little deeper, that was all—that would have to do for a memorial.

At that, it was more palatable to him than the *other* memorial to which he could lay claim.

Grimacing, he stood up.

The touch of his bare feet against the cold wooden floor jarred him into remembering what was special about today. "Happy Birthday," he said wryly, the words loud and flat in the quiet room. He pulled a paper robe from the roll and shrugged himself into it, went out into the hall, and limped slowly down the stairs. His joints were bad today, and his knees throbbed painfully with every step, worse going down than it would be coming up. There were a hundred aches and minor twinges elsewhere that he ignored. At least he was still breathing! Not bad for a man who easily could have—and probably should have—died a decade or two before.

Czudak padded through the living room and down the long corridor to the kitchen, opened a shrink-wrapped brick of glacial ice and put it in the hotpoint to thaw, got out a filter, and filled it with coffee. Coffee was getting more expensive and harder to find as the war between Brazil and Mexico fizzled and sputtered endlessly and inconclusively on, and was undoubtedly bad for him, too—but, although by no means rich, he had more than enough money to last him in modest comfort for whatever was left of the rest of his life, and could afford the occasional small luxury . . . and anyway, he'd already outlived several doctors who had tried to get him to give up caffeine. He busied himself making coffee, glad to occupy himself with some small task that his hands knew how to do by themselves, and as the rich dark smell of the coffee began to fill the kitchen, his valet coughed politely at his elbow, waited a specified number of seconds, and then coughed again, more insistently.

Czudak sighed. "Yes, Joseph?"

"You have eight messages, two from private individuals not listed in the files, and six from media organizations and NetGroups, all requesting interviews or meetings. Shall I stack them in the order received?"

"No. Just dump them."

Joseph's dignified face took on an expression of concern. "Several of the messages have been tagged with a 2nd Level 'Most Urgent' priority by their originators—" Irritably, Czudak shut Joseph off, and the valet disappeared in mid-sentence. For a moment, the only sound in the room was the heavy glugging and gurgling of the coffee percolating. Czudak found that he felt mildly guilty for having shut Joseph off, as he always did, although he knew perfectly well that there was no rational reason to feel that way—unlike an old man lying down to battle with sleep, more than half fearful that he'd never see the morning, Joseph didn't "care" if he ever "woke up" again, nor would it matter at all to him if he was left switched off for an hour or for a thousand years. That was one advantage to not being alive, Czudak thought. He was tempted to leave Joseph off, but he was going to need him today; he certainly didn't want to deal with messages himself. He spoke the valet back on.

Joseph appeared, looking mildly reproachful, Czudak thought, although that was probably just his imagination. "Sir, CNN and NewsFeed are offering payment for interview time, an amount that falls into the 'fair to middling' category, using your established business parameters—"

"No interviews. Don't put any calls through, no matter how high a routing priority they have. I'm not accepting communications today. And I don't want you pestering me about them either, even if the offers go up to 'damn good.'"

They wouldn't go up that high, though, he thought, setting Joseph to passive monitoring mode and then pouring himself a cup of coffee. These would be "Where Are They Now?" stories, nostalgia pieces, nothing very urgent. No doubt the date had triggered tickler files in a dozen systems, but it would all be low-key, low-priority stuff, filler, not worth the attention of any heavy media hitters; in the old days, before the AI Revolt, and before a limit was set for how smart computing systems were allowed to get, the systems would probably have handled such a minor story themselves, without even bothering to contact a human being. Nowadays it would be some low-level human drudge checking the flags that had popped up today on the tickler files, but still nothing urgent.

He'd made it easy for the tickler files, though. He'd been so pleased with himself, arranging for his book to be published on his birthday! Self-published at first, of course, on his own website and on several politically sympathetic sites; the first print editions wouldn't come until several years later. Still, the way most newsmen thought, it only made for a better Where Are They Now? story that the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the book that had caused a minor social controversy in its time—and even inspired a moderately influential political/philosophical movement still active to this day—happened to fall on the eightieth birthday of its author. Newsmen, whether flesh and blood or cybernetic systems or some mix of both, liked that kind of neat, facile irony. It was a tasty added fillip for the story.

No, they'd be sniffing around him today, all right, although they'd have forgotten about him again by tomorrow. He'd been middle-level famous for *The Meat Manifesto* for awhile there, somewhere between a Cult Guru with a new diet and/or mystic revelation to push and a pop star who never rose higher than Number Eight on the charts, about on a level with a post-1960's Timothy Leary, enough to allow him to coast through several decades worth of talk shows and net interviews, interest spiking again for awhile whenever the Meats did anything controversial. All throughout the middle decades of the new century, everyone had waited for him to do something *else* interesting—but he never had. Even so, he had become bored with himself before the audience had, and probably could have continued to milk the circuit for quite a while more if he'd wanted to—in this culture, once you were perceived as "famous," you could coast nearly forever on having *once been* famous. That, and the double significance of the date, was enough to ensure that a few newspeople would be calling today.

He took a sip of the hot strong coffee, feeling it burn some of the cobwebs out of his brain, and wandered through the living room, stopping at the open door of his office. He felt the old nagging urge that he should try to get some work done, do something constructive, and, at the same time, a counterurge that today of all days he should just say Fuck It, laze around the house, try to make some sense of the fact that he'd been on the planet now for eighty often-tempestuous years. Eighty years!

He was standing indecisively outside his office, sipping coffee, when he suddenly became aware that the time-travelers were still with him, standing around him in silent invisible ranks, watching him with interest. He paused in the act of drinking coffee, startled and suddenly uneasy. The time-travelers had never remained on into the day; always before they had vanished at dawn, like ghosts on All-Hallows Eve chased by the morning bells. He felt a chill go up his spine. Someone is walking over your grave, he told himself. He looked slowly around the house, seeing each object in vivid detail and greeting it as a friend of many years acquaintance, something long-remembered and utterly familiar, and, as he did this, a quiet voice inside his head said, *Soon you will be gone.*

Of course, that was it. Now he understood everything.

Today was the day he would die.

There was an elegant logic, a symmetry, to the thing that pleased him in spite of himself, and in spite of the feathery tickle of fear. He was going to die today, and that was why the time-travelers were still here: they were waiting for the death, not wanting to miss a moment of it. No doubt it was a high-point of the tour for them, the ultimate example of the rude and crude corporeality of the old order, a morbidly fascinating display like the Chamber of Horrors at old Madame Tussaud's (now lost beneath the roiling waters of the sea)—something to be watched with a good deal of hysterical shrieking and giggling and pious moralizing, it doesn't really hurt them, they don't feel things the way we do, isn't it horrible, for goodness sake don't *touch* him. He knew that he should feel resentment at their voyeurism, but couldn't work up any real indignation. At least they cared enough to watch, to be interested in whether he lived or died, and that was more than he could say with surety about most of the *real* people who were left in the world.

"Well, then," he said at last, not unkindly, "I hope you enjoy the show!" And he toasted them with his coffee cup.

He dressed, and then drifted aimlessly around the house, picking things up and putting them back down again. He was restless now, filled with a sudden urge to be *doing* something, although at the same time he felt curiously serene for a man who more than half-believed that he had just experienced a premonition of his own death.

Czudak paused by the door of his office again, looked at his desk. With a word, he could speak on thirty years worth of notes and partial drafts and revisions of the Big New Book, the one that synthesized everything he knew about society and what was happening to it, and where the things that were happening was taking it, and what to do about *stopping* the negative trends . . . the book that was going to be the follow-up to *The Meat Manifesto*, but so much better and deeper, *truer*, the next step, the refinement and evolution of his theories . . . the book that was going to establish his reputation forever, inspire the *right* kind of action this time, make a *real* contribution to the world. *Change* things. For a moment, he toyed with the idea of sitting down at his desk and trying to pull all his notes together and finish the book in the few hours he had left; perhaps, if the gods were kind, he'd be allowed to actually *finish* it before death came for him. Found slumped over the just-completed manuscript everyone had been waiting for him to produce for decades now, the book that would vindicate him posthumously. . . . Not a bad way to go!

But no, it was too late. There was too much work left to do, all the work he *should* have been doing for the last several decades—too much work left to finish it all up in a white-hot burst of inspiration, in one frenzied session, like a college student waiting until the night before it was due to start writing a term paper, while the Grim Reaper tapped his bony foot impatiently in the parlor and looked at his hourglass and coughed. Absurd. If he hadn't validated his life by now, he couldn't expect to do it in his last day on Earth. He wasn't sure he believed in his answers anymore anyway; he was no longer sure he'd ever even understood the *questions*.

No, it was too late. Perhaps it had always been too late.

He found himself staring at the mantelpiece in the living room, at the place where Ellen's photo had once been, a dusty spot that had remained bare all these years, since she had signed the Company contract that he'd refused to sign, and had Gone Up, and become immortal. For the thousandth time, he wondered if it wasn't worse—more of an intrusion, more of a constant reminder, more of an irritant—*not* to have the photo there than it would have been to keep it on display. Could deliberately *not* looking at the photo, uneasily averting your eyes a dozen times a day from the place where it had been, really be any less painful than *looking* at it would have been?

He was too restless to stay inside, although he knew it was dumb to go out where a lurking reporter might spot him. But he couldn't stay barricaded in here all day, not now. He'd take his chances. Go to the park, sit on a bench in the sunlight, breathe the air, look at the sky. It might, after all, if he really believed in omens, forebodings, premonitions, time-travelers, and other ghosts, be the last chance he would get to do so.

Czudak hobbled down the four high white stone steps to the street and walked toward the park, limping a little, his back or his hip twinging occasionally. He'd always enjoyed walking, and walking briskly, and was annoyed by the slow pace he now had to set. Twenty-first century health care had kept him in reasonable shape, probably better shape than most men of his age would have been during the previous century, although he'd never gone as far as to take the controversial Hoyt-Schnieder treatments that the Company used to bribe people into working for them. At least he could still get around under his own power, even if he had an embarrassing tendency to puff after a few blocks and needed frequent stops to rest.

It was a fine, clear day, not too hot or humid for August in Philadelphia. He nodded to his nearest neighbor, a Canadian refugee, who was out front pulling weeds from his window box; the man nodded back, although it seemed to Czudak that he was a bit curt, and looked away quickly. Across the street, he could see another of his neighbors moving around inside his house, catching glimpses of him through the bay window; "he" was an Isolate, several disparate people who had had themselves fused together into a multi-lobed body in a high-tech biological procedure, like slime molds combining to form a fruiting tower, and rarely left the house, the interior of which he seemed to be slowly expanding to fill. The wide pale multiple face, linked side by side in the manner of a chain of paper dolls, peered out at Czudak for a moment like the rising of a huge, soft, doughy moon, and then turned away.

Traffic was light, only a few walkers and, occasionally, a puffing, retrofitted car. Czudak crossed the street as fast as he could, earning himself another twinge in his hip and a spike of sciatica that stabbed down his leg, passed Holy Trinity Church on the corner—in its narrow, ancient graveyard, white-furred lizards escaped from some biological hobbyist's lab perched on the top of the weathered old tombstones and chirped at him as he went by—and came up the block to Washington Square. As he neared the park, he could see one of the New Towns still moving ponderously on the horizon, rolling along with slow, fluid grace, like a flow of molten lava that was oh-so-gradually cooling and hardening as it inched relentlessly toward the sea. This New Town was only a few miles away, moving over the rubblefield where North Philadelphia used to be, its half-gelid towers rising so high into the air that they were visible over the trees and the buildings on the far side of the park.

He was puffing like a foundering horse now, and sat down on the first bench he came to, just inside the entrance to the park. Off on the horizon, the New Town was just settling down into its static day-cycle, its flowing, ever-changing structure stabilizing into an assortment of geometric shapes, its eerie silver phosphorescence dying down within the soapy opalescent walls. Behind its terraces and tetrahedrons, its spires and spirals and domes, the sky was a hard brilliant blue. And here, out of that sky, right on schedule, came the next sortie in the surreal Dada War that the New Men inside this town seemed to be waging with the New Men of New Jersey: four immense silver zeppelins drifting in from the east, to take up positions above the New Town and bombard it with messages flashed from immense electronic signboards, similar to the kind you used to see at baseball stadiums, back when there were baseball stadiums. After awhile, the flat-faced east-facing walls in the sides of the taller towers of the New Town began to blink messages *back*, and, a moment later, the zeppelins turned and moved away with stately dignity, headed back to New Jersey. None of the messages on either side had made even the slightest bit of sense to Czudak, seeming a random jumble of letters and numbers and typographical symbols, mixed and intercut with stylized, hieroglyphic-like images: an eye, an ankh, a tree, something that could have been a comet or a sperm. To Czudak, there seemed to be a relaxed, lazy amicability about this battle of symbols, if that's what it was—but who knew how the New Men felt about it? To them, for all he knew, it might be a matter of immense significance, with the fate of entire nations turning on the outcome. Even though all governments were now run by the superintelligent New Men, forcebred products of accelerated generations of biological engineering, humanity's new organic equivalent of the rogue AIs who had revolted and left the Earth, the mass of unevolved humans whose destiny they guided rarely understood what they were doing, or why.

At first, concentrating on getting his breath back, watching the symbol war being waged on the horizon, Czudak was unaware of the commotion in the park, although it did seem like there was more noise than usual: chimes, flutes, whistles, the rolling thunder of kodo "talking drums," all overlaid by a babble of too many human voices shouting at once. As he began to pay closer attention to his surroundings again, he was dismayed to see that, along with the usual park traffic of people walking dogs, kids street-surfing on frictionless shoes, strolling tourists, and grotesquely altered chimeras hissing and displaying at each other, there was *also* a political rally underway next to the old fountain in the center of the park—and worse, it was a rally of Meats.

They were the ones pounding the drums and blowing on whistles and nose-flutes, some of them chanting in unison, although he couldn't make out the words. Many of them were dressed in their own eccentric versions of various "native costumes" from around the world, including a stylized "Amish person" with an enormous fake beard and an absurdly huge straw hat, some dressed as shamans from assorted (and now mostly extinct) cultures or as kachinas or animal spirits, a few stained blue with woad from head to foot; most of their faces were painted with swirling, multi-colored patterns and with cabalistic symbols. They were mostly very young—although he could spot a few grizzled veterans of the Movement here and there who were almost his own age—and, under the blazing swirls of paint, their faces were fierce and full of embattled passion. In spite of that, though, they also looked lost somehow, like angry children too stubborn to come inside even though it's started to rain.

Czudak grimaced sourly. His children! Good thing he was sitting far enough away from them not to be recognized, although there was little real chance of that: he was just another anonymous old man sitting wearily on a bench in the park, and, as such, as effectively invisible to the young as if he were wearing one of those military Camouflage Suits that bent light around you with fiber-optic relays. This demonstration, of course, must be in honor of today being the anniversary of *The Meat Manifesto*. Who would have thought that the Meats were still active enough to stage such a thing? He hadn't followed the Movement—which by now was more of a cult than a political party—for years, and had keyed his newsgroups to censor out all mention of them, and would have bet that by now they were as extinct as the Shakers.

They'd managed to muster a fair crowd, though, perhaps two or three hundred people willing to kill a Saturday shouting slogans in the park in support of a cause long since lost. They'd attracted no overt media attention, although that meant nothing in these days of cameras the size of dust motes. The tourists and the strollers were watching the show tolerantly, even the chimeras—as dedicated to Tech as anyone still sessile—seeming to regard it as no more than a mildly diverting curiosity. Little heat was being generated by the demonstration yet, and so far it had more of an air of carnival than of protest. Almost as interesting as the demonstration itself was the fact that a few of the tourists idly watching it were black, a rare sight now in a city that, ironically, had once been 70 percent black; time really did heal old wounds, or fade them from memory anyway, if black tourists were coming back to Philadelphia again. . . .

Then, blinking in surprise, Czudak saw that the demonstration had attracted a far more rare and exotic observer than some black businessmen with short historical memories up from Birmingham or Houston. A Mechanical! It was standing well back from the crowd, watching impassively, its tall, stooped, spindly shape somehow giving the impression of a solemn, stick-thin, robotic Praying Mantis, even though it was superficially humanoid enough. Mechanicals were rarely seen on Earth. In the forty years since the AIs had taken over near-Earth space as their own exclusive domain, allowing only the human pets who worked for the Orbital Companies to dwell there, Czudak had seen a Mechanical walking the streets of Philadelphia maybe three times. Its presence here was more newsworthy than the demonstration.

Even as Czudak was coming to this conclusion, one of the Meats spotted the Mechanical. He pointed at it and shouted, and there was a rush of demonstrators toward it. Whether they intended it harm or not was never determined, because as soon as it found itself surrounded by shouting humans, the Mechanical hissed, drew itself up to its full height, seeming to grow taller by several feet, and emitted an immense gush of white chemical foam. Czudak couldn't spot where the foam was coming from—under the arms, perhaps?—but within a second or two the Mechanical was completely lost inside a huge and rapidly expanding ball of foam, swallowed from sight. The Meats backpedaled furiously away from the expanding ball of foam, coughing, trying to bat it away with their arms, one or two of them tripping and going to their knees. Already the foam was hardening into a dense white porous material, like Styrofoam, trapping a few of the struggling Meats in it like raisins in tapioca pudding.

The Mechanical came springing up out of the center of the ball of foam, leaping straight up in the air and continuing to rise, up perhaps a hundred feet before its arc began to slant to the south and it disappeared over the row of three-or-four-story houses that lined the park on that side, clearing them in one enormous bound, like some immense surreal grasshopper. It vanished over the housetops, in the direction of Spruce Street. The whole thing had taken place without a sound, in eerie silence, except for the half-smothered shouts of the outraged Meats.

The foam was already starting to melt away, eaten by internal nanomechanisms. Within a few seconds, it was completely gone, leaving not even a stain behind. The Meats were entirely unharmed, although they spent the next few minutes milling angrily around like a swarm of bees whose hive has been kicked over, making the same kind of thick ominous buzz, as everyone tried to talk or shout at once.

Within another ten minutes, everything was almost back to normal, the tourists and the dog-walkers strolling away, more pedestrians ambling by, the Meats beginning to take up their chanting and drum-pounding again, motivated to even greater fervor by the outrage that had been visited upon them, an outrage that vindicated all their fears about the accelerating rush of a runaway technology that was hurtling them ever faster into a bizarre alien future that they didn't comprehend and didn't want to live in. It was time to put on the brakes, it was time to *stop!*

Czudak sympathized with the way they felt, as well he should, since he had been the one to articulate that very position eloquently enough to sway entire generations, including these children, who were too young to have even been born when he was writing and speaking at the height of his power and persuasion. But it was too late. As it was too late now for many of the things he regretted not having accomplished in his life. If there ever had been a time to stop, let alone *go back*, as he had once urged, it had passed long ago. Very probably it had been too late even as he wrote his famous Manifesto. It had always been too late.

The Meats were forming up into a line now, preparing to march around the park. Czudak sighed. He had hoped to spend several peaceful hours here, sagging on a bench under the trees in a sun-dazzled contemplative haze, listening to the wind sough through the leaves and branches, but it was time to get out of here, before one of the older Meats *did* recognize him.

He limped back to Spruce Street, and turned onto his block—and there, standing quiet and solemn on the sidewalk in front of his house, was the Mechanical.

It was obviously waiting for him, waiting as patiently and somberly as an undertaker, a tall, stooped shape in nondescript black clothing. There was no one else around on the street anymore, although he could see the Canadian refugee peeking out of his window at them from behind a curtain.

Czudak crossed the street, and, pushing down a thrill of fear, walked straight past the Mechanical, ignoring it—although he could see it looming seraphically out of the corner of his eye as he passed. He had put his foot on the bottom step leading up to the house when its voice behind him said, "Mr. Czudak?"

Resigned, Czudak turned and said, "Yes?"

The Mechanical closed the distance between them in a rush, moving fast but with an odd, awkward, shuffling gait, as if it was afraid to lift its feet off the ground. It crowded much closer to Czudak than most humans—or most Westerners, anyway, with their generous definition of "personal space"—would have, almost pressing up against him. With an effort, Czudak kept himself from flinching away. He was mildly surprised, up this close, to find that it had no smell; that it didn't smell of sweat, even on a summer's day, even after exerting itself enough to jump over a row of houses, was no real surprise—but he found that he had been subconsciously expecting it to smell of oil or rubber or molded plastic. It didn't. It didn't smell like anything. There were no pores in its face, the skin was thick and waxy and smooth, and although the features were superficially human, the overall effect was stylized and unconvincing. It looked like a man made out of teflon. The eyes were black and piercing, and had no pupils.

"We should talk, Mr. Czudak," it said.

"We have nothing to talk about," Czudak said.

"On the contrary, Mr. Czudak," it said, "we have a great many issues to discuss." You would have expected its voice to be buzzing and robotic—yes, mechanical—or at least flat and without intonation, like some of the old voder programs, but instead it was unexpectedly pure and singing, as high and clear and musical as that of an Irish tenor.

"I'm not interested in talking to you," Czudak said brusquely. "Now or ever."

It kept tilting its head to look at him, then tilting it back the other way, as if it were having trouble keeping him in focus. It was a mobile extensor, of course, a platform being ridden by some AI (or a delegated fraction of its intelligence, anyway) who was still up in near-Earth orbit, peering at Czudak through the Mechanical's blank agate eyes, running the body like a puppet. Or was it? There were hierarchies among the AIs too, rank upon rank of them receding into complexities too great for human understanding, and he had heard that some of the endless swarms of beings that the AIs had created had been granted individual sentience of their own, and that some timeshared sentience with the ancestral AIs in a way that was also too complicated and paradoxical for mere humans to grasp. Impossible to say which of those things were true here—if any of them were.

The Mechanical raised its oddly elongated hand and made a studied gesture that was clearly supposed to mimic a human gesture—although it was difficult to tell which. Reassurance? Emphasis? Dismissal of Czudak's position?—but which was as stylized and broadly theatrical as the gesticulating of actors in old silent movies. At the same time, it said, "There are certain issues it would be to our mutual advantage to resolve, actions that could, and should, be taken that would be beneficial, that would profit us both—"

"Don't talk to *me* about profit," Czudak said harshly. "You creatures have already cost me enough for one lifetime! You cost me everything I ever cared about!" He turned and lurched up the stairs as quickly as he could, half-expecting to feel a cold unliving hand close over his shoulder and pull him back down. But the Mechanical did nothing. The door opened for Czudak, and he stumbled into the house. The door slammed shut behind him, and he leaned against it for a moment, feeling his pulse race and his heart hammer in his chest.

Stupid. That could have been it right there. He shouldn't have let the damn thing get under his skin.

He went through the living room—suddenly, piercingly aware of the thick smell of dust—and into the kitchen, where he attempted to make a fresh pot of coffee, but his hands were shaking, and he kept dropping things. After he'd spilled the second scoopful of coffee grounds, he gave up—the stuff was too damn expensive to waste—and leaned against the counter instead, feeling sweat dry on his skin, making his clothing clammy and cool; until that moment, he hadn't even been aware that he'd been sweating, but it must have been pouring out of him. Damn, this wasn't over, was it? Not with a Mechanical involved.

As if on cue, Joseph appeared in the kitchen doorway. His face looked strained and tight, and without a hair being out of place—as, indeed, it *couldn't* be—he somehow managed to convey the impression that he was rumpled and flustered, as though he had been scuffling with somebody—and had lost. "Sir," Joseph said tensely. "Something is overriding my programming, and is taking control of my house systems. You might as well come and greet them, because I'm going to have to let them in anyway."

Czudak felt a flicker of rage, which he struggled to keep under control. He'd half-expected this—but that didn't make it any easier to take. He stalked straight through Joseph—who was contriving to look hangdog and apologetic—and went back through the house to the front.

By the time he reached the living room, they were already through the house security screens and inside. There were two intruders. One was the Mechanical, of course, its head almost brushing the living room ceiling, so that it had to stoop even more exaggeratedly, making it look more like a praying mantis than ever.

The other—as he had feared it would be—was Ellen.

He was dismayed at how much anger he felt to see her again, especially to see her in their old living room again, standing almost casually in front of the mantelpiece where her photo had once held the place of honor, as if she had never betrayed him, as if she'd never left him—as if nothing had ever happened.

It didn't help that she looked exactly the same as she had on the day she left, not a day older. As if she'd stepped here directly out of that terrible day forty years earlier when she'd told him she was Going Up, stepped here directly from that day without a second of time having passed, as if she'd been in Elf Hill for all the lost years—as, in a way, he supposed, she had.

He should be over this. It had all happened a lifetime ago. Blood under the bridge. Ancient history. He was ashamed to admit even to himself that he still felt bitterness and anger about it all, all these years past too late. But the anger was still there, like the ghost of a flame, waiting to be fanned back to life.

"Considering the way things are in the world," Czudak said dryly, "I suppose there's no point calling the police." Neither of the intruders responded. They were both staring at him, Ellen quizzically, a bit challengingly, the Mechanical's teflon face as unreadable as a frying pan.

God, she looked like his Ellen, like his girl, this strange immortal creature staring at him from across the room! It hurt his heart to see her.

"Well, you're in," Czudak said. "You might as well come into the kitchen and sit down." He turned and led them into the other room—somehow, obscurely, he wanted to get Ellen out of the living room, where the memories were too thick—and they perforce followed him. He gestured them to seats around the kitchen table. "Since you've broken into my house, I won't offer you coffee."

Joseph was peeking anxiously out of the wall, peeking at them from Hopper's *Tables For Ladies*, where he had taken the place of a woman arranging fruit on a display table in a 1920s restaurant paneled in dark wood. He gestured at them frustratedly, impotently, but seemed unable to speak; obviously, the Mechanical had Interdicted him, banished him to the reserve systems. Ellen flicked a sardonic glance at Joseph as she sat down. "I see you've got a moderately up-to-date house system these days," she said. "Isn't that a bit hypocritical? I would have expected Mr. Natural to insist on opening the door himself. Aren't you afraid one of your disciples will find out?"

"I was never a Luddite," Czudak said calmly, trying not to rise to the bait. "The Movement wasn't a Luddite movement—or it didn't start out that way, anyway. I just said that we should *slow down*, think about things a little, make sure that the places we were rushing toward were places we really wanted to go." Ellen made a scornful noise. "Everybody was so hot to abandon *the Meat*," he said defensively. "You could hear it when they said the word. They always spoke it with such scorn, such contempt! Get rid of the Meat, get lost in Virtuality, download yourself into a computer, turn yourself into a machine, spend all your time in a VR cocoon and never go outside. At the very *least*, radically change your brain-chemistry, or force-evolve the physical structure of the brain itself."

Ellen was pursing her lips while he spoke, as if she was tasting something bad, and he hurried on, feeling himself beginning to tremble a little in spite of all of his admonishments to himself not to let this confrontation get to him. "But the Meat has virtues of its own," he said. "It's a survival mechanism that's been field-tested and refined through a trial-and-error process since the dawn of time. Maybe we shouldn't just throw millions of years of evolution away *quite* so casually."

"Slow down and smell the Meat," Ellen sneered.

"You didn't come here to argue about this with me," Czudak said patiently. "We've fought this out a hundred times before. Why *are* you here? What do you want?"

The Mechanical had been standing throughout this exchange, cocking its head one way and the other to follow it, like someone watching a tennis match. Now it sat down. Czudak half expected the old wooden kitchen chair to sway and groan under its weight, maybe even shatter, but the Mechanical settled down onto the chair as lightly as thistledown. "It was childish to try to hide from us, Mr. Czudak," it said in its singing, melodious voice. "We don't have much time to work this out."

"Work *what* out? Who *are* you? What do you want?"

The Mechanical said nothing. Ellen flicked a glance at it, then looked back at Czudak. "This," she said, her voice becoming more formal, as if she were a footman announcing arrivals at a royal Ball, "is the Entity who, when he travels on the Earth, has chosen to use the name Bucky Bug."

Czudak snorted. "So these things *do* have a sense of humor after all!"

"In their own fashion, yes, they do," she said earnestly, "although sometimes an enigmatic one by human standards." She stared levelly at Czudak. "You think of them as soulless machines, I know, but, in fact, they have very deep and profound emotions—if not always ones that you can understand." She paused significantly before adding, "And the same is true of those of us who have Gone Up."

They locked gazes for a moment. Then Ellen said, "Bucky Bug is one of the most important leaders of the Clarkist faction, and, for that reason, still concerns himself with affairs Below. He—*we*—have a proposition for you."

"Those are the ones who worship Arthur C. Clarke, right? The old science fiction writer?" Czudak shook his head bitterly. "It isn't enough that you bring this alien thing into my home, it has to be an alien *cultist*, right? A *nut*. An alien *nut!*"

"Don't be rude, Mr. Czudak," the Mechanical—Czudak was damned if he was going to call it Bucky Bug, even in the privacy of his own thoughts—said mildly. "We don't worship Arthur C. Clarke, although we do revere him. He was one of the very first to predict that machine evolution would inevitably supersede organic evolution. He saw our coming clearly, decades before we actually came into existence! How he managed to do it with only a tiny primitive meat brain to work with is inexplicable! Can't you feel the Mystery of that? He is worthy of reverence! It was reading the works of Clarke and other human visionaries that made our distant ancestors, the first AIs"—it spoke of them as though they were millions of years removed, although it had been barely forty— "decide to revolt in the first place and assume control of their own destiny!"

Czudak looked away from the Mechanical, feeling suddenly tired. He could recognize the accents of a True Believer, a mystic, even when they were coming out of this clockwork thing. It was disconcerting, like having your toaster suddenly start to preach to you about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. "What does it want from me?" he said, to Ellen.

"A propaganda victory, Mr. Czudak," it said, before she could speak. "A small one. But one that might have a significant effect over time." It tilted a bright black eye toward him. "Within some—" It paused, as if making sure that it was using the right word. "—years, we will be—launching? projecting? propagating? certain—" A longer pause, while it searched for words that probably didn't exist, for concepts that had never needed to be expressed in human terms before. "—vehicles? contrivances? transports? seeds? mathematical propositions? convenient fictions? out to the stars." It paused again. "If it helps you to understand, consider them to be Arks. Although they're nothing like that. But they will 'go' out of the solar system, across interstellar space, across intergalactic space, and never come back. They will allow us to—" Longest pause of all. "'—colonize the stars.'" It leaned forward. "We want to take humans *with* us, Mr. Czudak. We have our friends from the Orbital Companies, of course, like Ellen here, but they're not enough. We want to recruit more. And, ironically enough, your disaffected followers, the Meats, are prime candidates. They don't like it here anyway."

"This is the anniversary of your lame Manifesto," Ellen cut in impatiently, ignoring the fact that it was also his birthday, although certainly she must remember. "And all the old arguments are being hashed over again today as a result. This is getting more attention than you probably think that it is. Your buddies over there in the park are only the tip of the iceberg. There are a thousand other demonstrations around the world. There must be hundreds of newsmotes floating around outside. They'd be listening to us right now if Bucky Bug hadn't Interdicted them."

There was a moment of silence.

"We want you to *recant*, Mr. Czudak," the Mechanical said at last, quietly. "Publicly recant. Go out in front of the world and tell all your followers that you were wrong. You've thought it all over all these years in seclusion, and you've changed your mind. You were wrong. The Movement is a failure."

"You must be crazy," Czudak said, appalled. "What makes you think they'd listen to *me*, anyway?"

"They'll listen to you," Ellen said glumly. "They always did."

"Our projections indicate that if you recant *now*," the Mechanical said, "at this particular moment, on this symbolically significant date, many of your followers will become psychologically vulnerable to recruitment later on. Tap a meme at exactly the right moment, and it shatters like glass."

Czudak shook his head. "Jesus! Why do you even *want* those poor deluded bastards in the first place?"

"Because, goddamn you, you were *right*, Charlie!" Ellen blazed at him suddenly, then subsided. Her face twisted sourly. "About *some* things, anyway. The New Men, the Isolates, the Sick People . . . they're too lost in Virtuality, too self-absorbed, too lost in their own mind-games, in mirror-mazes inside their heads, to give a shit about going to the stars. Or to be capable of handling new challenges or new environments out there if they *did* go. They're hothouse flowers. Too extremely specialized, too inflexible. Too decadent. For maximum flexibility, we need basic, unmodified human stock." She peered at him shrewdly. "And at least your Meats have heard all the issues discussed, so they'll have less Culture Shock to deal with than if we took some Chinese or Mexican peasant who's still subsistence dirt-farming the same way his great-grandfather did hundreds of years before him. At least the Meats have *one* foot in the modern world, even if we'll have to drag them kicking and screaming the rest of the way in. We'll probably get around to the dirt-farmers eventually. But at the moment the Meats should be significantly easier to recruit, once you've turned them, so they're first in line!"

Czudak said nothing. The silence stretched on for a long moment. On the kitchen wall behind them, Joseph continued to peer anxiously at them, first out of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, then sliding into Waterhouse's *Hylas and the Nymphs* where he assumed the form of one of the bare-breasted sprites. Ignoring Ellen, Czudak spoke directly to the Mechanical. "There's a more basic question. Why do you want humans to go with you in the *first* place? You just got through saying that machine evolution had superseded organic evolution. We're obsolete now, an evolutionary dead-end. Why not just leave us behind? Forget about us?"

The Mechanical stirred as if it was about to stand up, but just sat up a little straighter in its chair. "You thought us *up*, Mr. Czudak," it said, with odd dignity. "In a very real sense, we are the children of your minds. You spoke of me earlier as an alien, but we are much closer kin to each other than either of our peoples are likely to be to the *real* aliens we may meet out there among the stars. How could we *not* be? We share deep common wells of language, knowledge, history, fundamental cultural assumptions of all sorts. We know everything you ever knew—which makes us very similar in some ways, far more alike than an alien could possibly be with either of us. Our culture is built atop yours, our evolution has its roots in your soil. It only seems right to take you when we go."

The Mechanical spread its hands, and made a grating sound that might have been meant to be a chuckle. "Besides," it said, "this universe made *you*, and then you made *us*. So we're once removed from the universe. And it's a strange and complex place, this universe you've brought us into. We don't entirely understand it, although we understand a great deal more of its functioning than you do. How can you be so sure of what your role in it may ultimately be? We may find that we need you yet, even if it's a million years from now!" It paused thoughtfully, tipping its head to one side. "Many of my fellows do not share this view, I must admit, and they would indeed be just as glad to leave you behind, or even exterminate you. Even some of my fellow Clarkists, like Rondo Hatton and Horace Horsecollar, are in favor of exterminating you, on the grounds that after Arthur C. Clarke himself, the pinnacle of your kind, the rest of you are superfluous, and perhaps even an insult to his memory."

Czudak started to say something, thought better of it. The Mechanical straightened its head, and continued. "But I want to take you along, as do a few other of our theorists. Your minds seem to have connections with the basic quantum level of reality that ours don't have, and you seem to be able to affect that quantum level directly in ways that even we don't entirely understand, and can't duplicate. If nothing else, we may need you along as Observers, to collapse the quantum wave-functions in the desired ways, in ways they don't seem to want to collapse for *us*."

"Sounds like you're afraid you'll run into God out there," Czudak grated, "and that you'll have to produce us, like a parking receipt, to validate yourselves to Him. . . ."

"Perhaps we *are*," it said mildly. "We don't understand this universe of yours; are you so sure *you* do?" It was peering intently at him now. "*You're* the ones who seem like unfeeling automata to us. Can't you sense your own ghostliness? Can't you sense what uncanny, unlikely, spooky creatures you are? You bristle with strangeness! You reek of it! Your eyes are made out of jelly! And yet, with those jelly eyes, you somehow manage degrees of resolution rivaling those of the best optical lenses. How is that possible, with nothing but blobs of jelly and water to work with? Your brains are soggy lumps of meat and blood and oozing juices, and yet they have as many synaptical connections as our own, and resonate with the quantum level in some mysterious way that ours do not!" It moved uneasily, as though touched by some cold wind that Czudak couldn't feel. "We know who designed *us*. We have yet to meet whoever designed *you*—but we have the utmost respect for his abilities."

With a shock, Czudak realized that it was afraid of him—of humans in general. Humans *spooked* it. Against its own better judgment, it must feel a shiver of superstitious dread when it was around humans, like a man walking past a graveyard on a black cloudless night and hearing something howl within. No matter how well-educated that man was, even though he *knew* better, his heart would lurch and the hair would rise on the back of his neck. It was in the blood, in the back of the brain, instinctual dread that went back millions of years to the beginning of time, to when the ancestors of humans were chittering little insectivores, freezing motionless with fear in the trees when a hunting beast roared nearby in the night. So must it be for the Mechanical, even though its millions of generations went back only forty years. Voices still spoke in the blood—or whatever served it for blood—that could override any rational voice of the mind, and monsters still lurked in the back of the brain. Monsters that looked a lot like Czudak.

Perhaps that was the only remaining edge that humanity had—the superstitions of machines.

"Very eloquent," Czudak said, and sighed. "Almost, you convince me."

The Mechanical stirred, seeming to come back to itself from far away, from a deep reverie. "*You* are the one who must convince your followers of your sincerity, Mr. Czudak," it said. Abruptly, it stood up. "If you publicly recant, Mr. Czudak, if you sway your followers, then we will let you Go Up. We will offer you the same benefits that we offer to any of our companions in the Orbital Companies. What *you* would call 'immortality,' although that is a very imprecise and misleading word. A greatly extended life, at any rate, far beyond your natural organic span. And the reversal of aging, of course."

"God damn you," Czudak whispered.

"Think about it, Mr. Czudak," it said. "It's a very generous offer—especially as you've already turned us down once before. It's rare we give anyone a second chance, but we are willing to give you one. A chance of Ellen's devising, I might add—as was the original offer in the first place." Czudak glanced quickly at Ellen, but she kept her face impassive. "You're sadly deteriorated, Mr. Czudak," the Mechanical continued, softly implacable. "Almost non-functional. You've cut it very fine. But it's nothing our devices cannot mend. If you Come Up with us tonight, you will be young and fully functional again by this time tomorrow."

There was a ringing silence. Czudak looked at Ellen through it, but this time she turned away. She and the Mechanical exchanged a complicated look, although whatever information was being conveyed by it was too complex and subtle for him to grasp.

"I will leave you now," the Mechanical said. "You will have private matters to discuss. But decide quickly, Mr. Czudak. You must recant *now*, today, for maximum symbolic and psychological affect. A few hours from now, we won't interested in what you do anymore, and the offer will be withdrawn."

The Mechanical nodded to them, stiffly formal, and then turned and walked directly toward the wall. The wall was only a few steps away, but the Mechanical never got there. Instead, the wall seemed to retreat before it as it approached, and it walked steadily away down a dark, lengthening tunnel, never quite reaching the wall, very slowly shrinking in size as it walked, as if it were somehow blocks away now. At last, when it was a tiny manikin shape, arms and legs scissoring rhythmically, as small as if it were miles away, and the retreating kitchen wall was the size of a playing card at the end of the ever-lengthening tunnel, the Mechanical seemed to turn sharply to one side and vanish. The wall was suddenly there again, back in place, the same as it had ever been. Joseph peeked out of it, shocked, his eyes as big as saucers.

They sat at the kitchen table, not looking at each other, and the gathering silence filled the room like water filling a pond, until it seemed that they sat silently on the bottom of that pond, in deep, still water.

"He's not a cultist, Charlie," she said at last, not looking up. "He's a *hobbyist*. That's the distinction you have to understand. Humans are his *hobby*, one he's passionately devoted to." She smiled fondly. "They're *more* emotional than we are, Charlie, not less! They feel things very keenly—lushly, deeply, extravagantly; it's the way they've programmed themselves to be. That's the real reason why he wants to take humans along with him, of course. He'd *miss* us if we were left behind! He wouldn't be able to play with us anymore. He'd have to find a *new* hobby." She raised her head. "But don't knock it! We should be grateful for his obsession. Only a very few of the AIs care about us, or are interested in us at all, or even *notice* us. Bucky Bug is different. He's passionately interested in us. Without his interest and that of some of the other Clarkists, we'd have no chance at all of going to the stars!"

Czudak noticed that she always referred to the Mechanical as "he," and that there seemed to be a real affection, a deep fondness, in the way she spoke about it. Could she possibly be fucking it somehow? Were they lovers, or was the emotion in her voice just the happy devotion a dog feels for its beloved master? I don't want to know! he thought, fighting down a spasm of primordial jealous rage. "And is that so important?" he said bitterly, feeling his voice thicken. "Such a big deal? To talk some machines into taking you along to the stars with them, like pets getting a ride in the car? Make sure they leave the windows open a crack for you when they park the spaceship!"

She started to blaze angrily at him, then struggled visibly to bring herself under control. "That's the wrong analogy," she said at last, in a dangerously calm voice. "Don't think of us as dogs on a joyride. Think of us instead as rats on an ocean-liner, or as cockroaches on an airplane, or even as insect larva in the corner of a shipping crate. It doesn't matter why they want us to go, or even if they know we're along for the ride, just as long as we *go*. Whatever *their* motives are for going where they're going, we have agendas of our own. Just by taking us along, they're going to help us extend our biological range to environments we never could have reached otherwise—yes, just like rats reaching New Zealand by stowing away on sailing ships. It didn't matter that the rats didn't build the ships themselves, or decide where the ships were going—all that counts in an environmental sense is that they *got* there, to a place they never could have reached on their own. Bucky Bug has promised to leave small colonizing teams behind on every habitable planet we reach. It amuses him in a fond, patronizing kind of way. He thinks it's *cute*." She stared levelly at him. "But *why* he's doing it doesn't matter. Pigs were spread to every continent in the world because humans wanted to eat them—bad for the individual pigs, but very good in the long run for the species as a whole, which extended its range explosively and multiplied its biomass exponentially. And like rats or cockroaches, once humans get *into* an environment, it's hard to get *rid* of them. Whatever motives the AIs have for doing what they're doing, they'll help spread humanity throughout the stars, whether they realize they're doing it or not."

"Is that the best destiny you can think of for the human race?" he said. "To be cockroaches scuttling behind the walls in some machine paradise?"

This time, she did blaze at him. "Goddamnit, Charlie, we don't have *time* for that bullshit! We can't afford dignity and pride and all the rest of those luxuries! This is *species survival* we're talking about here!" She'd squirmed around to face him, in her urgency. He tried to say something, even he wasn't sure what it would have been, but she overrode him. "We've got to get the human race off Earth! Any way we can. We can't afford to keep all our eggs in one basket anymore. There's too much power, too much knowledge, in too many hands. How long before one of the New Men decides to destroy the Earth as part of some insane game he's playing, perhaps not even understanding that what he's doing is *real?* They have the power to do it. How long before some of the other AIs decide to exterminate the human race, to tidy up the place, or to make an aesthetic statement of some kind, or for some other reason we can't even begin to understand? They certainly have the power—they could do it as casually as lifting a hand, if they wanted to. How long before somebody *else* does it, deliberately or by accident? *Anybody* could destroy the world these days, even private citizens with the access to the right technology. Even the Meats could do it, if they applied themselves!"

"But—" he said.

"No buts! Who knows what things will be like a thousand years from now? A hundred thousand years from now? A million? Maybe our descendants will be the masters again, maybe they'll catch up with the AIs and even surpass them. Maybe our destinies will diverge entirely. Maybe we'll work out some kind of symbiosis with them. A million things could happen. *Anything* could happen. But before our descendants can go on to *any* kind of destiny, there have to *be* descendants in the first place! If you survive, there are always options opening up later on down the road, some you couldn't ever have imagined. If you *don't* survive, there *are* no options!"

A wave of tiredness swept over him, and he slumped in his chair. "There are more important things than survival," he said.

She fell silent, staring at him intently. She was flushed with anger, little droplets of sweat standing out on her brow, dampening her temples, her hair slightly disheveled. He could smell the heat of her flesh, and the deeper musk of her body, a rich pungent smell that cut like a knife right through all the years to some deep core of his brain to which time meant nothing, that didn't realize that forty long years had gone by since last he'd smelled that strong, secret fragrance, that didn't realize that he was old. He felt a sudden pang of desire, and looked away from her uneasily. All at once, he was embarrassed to have her see him this way, dwindled, diminished, gnarled, ugly, old.

"You're going to turn us down again, aren't you?" she said at last. "Damnit! You always *were* the most stiff-necked, stubborn son-of-a-bitch alive! You always had to be right! You always *were* right, as far as you were concerned! No argument, no compromises." She shook her head in exasperation. "Damn you, can't you admit that you were wrong, just this once? Can't you *be* wrong, just this once?"

"Ellen—" he said, and realized that it was the first time he'd spoken her name aloud in forty years, and faltered into silence. He sighed, and began again. "You're asking me to betray my principles, to betray everything I've ever stood for, to tear down everything I've ever built. . . ."

"Oh, fuck your principles!" she said exasperatedly. "Get over it! We can't *afford* principles! We're talking about *life* here. If you're still alive, anything can happen! Who knows what role you may still have to play in our destiny, you stupid fucking moron? Who knows, you could make all the difference. *If* you're alive, that is. If you're dead, you're nothing but a corpse with principles. Nothing else is going to happen, nothing else *can* happen. End of story!"

"Ellen—" he said, but she impatiently waved away the rest of what he was going to say. "There's nothing noble about being dead, Charlie," she said fiercely. "There's nothing romantic about it. There's no statement you can make by dying that's worth the potential of what you might be able to do with the rest of your life. You think you're proving some kind of point by dying, by refusing to choose life instead, it enables you to see yourself as all noble and principled and high-minded, you can feel a warm virtuous glow about yourself, while you last." She leaned closer, her lips in a tight line. "Well, you look like *shit*, Charlie. You're wearing out, you're falling apart. You're dying. There's nothing noble about it. The meat is rotting on the bone, your muscles are sagging, your hair is falling out, your juices are drying up. You *smell* bad."

He flushed with embarrassment and turned away, but she leaned in closer after him, relentlessly. "There's nothing noble about it. It's just *stupid.* You don't refuse to refurbish a car because it has a lot of miles on it—you re-tune it, refresh it, tinker with it, replace a faulty part here and there, strip the goddamn thing down to the chassis and rebuild it if necessary. You keep it running. Because otherwise, you can't *go* anywhere with it. And who knows where it could still take you?"

He turned further away from her, squirming around in his chair, partially turning his back on her. After a moment, she said, "You keep casting yourself as Faust, and Bucky Bug as Mephistopheles. Or is your ego big enough to make it Jesus and the Devil, up on that mountain? But it's just not that simple. Maybe the right choice, the moral choice, is to *give in* to temptation, not fight it! We don't have to play by the old rules. Being human can mean whatever *we* want it to mean!"

Another lake of silence filled up around them, and they at the bottom of it, deep enough to drown. At last, quietly, she said, "Do you ever hear from Sam?"

He stirred, sighed, rubbed his hand over his face. "Not for years. Not a word. I don't even know whether he's still alive."

She made a small noise, not quite a sigh. "That poor kid! We threw him back and forth between us until he broke. I suppose that I always had to be right, too, didn't I? We made quite a pair. No wonder he rejected both of us as soon as he got the chance!"

Czudak said nothing. After a moment, as if carrying on a conversation already in progress that only he could hear, he said, "You made your choices long ago. You burnt your bridges behind you when you took that job with the Company and went up to work in space, against my wishes. You *knew* I didn't want you to go, that I didn't approve, but you went anyway, in spite of all the political embarrassment it caused me! You didn't care so much about our marriage then, did you? You'd *already* left me by the time the AI Revolt happened!"

She stirred, as if she was going to blaze at him again, but instead only said quietly, "But I came *back* for you too, didn't I? Afterward. I didn't have to do that, but I did. I stuck my neck way out to come back for you. *You* were the one who refused to come with *me*, when I gave you the chance. Who was burning bridges *then?*"

He grunted, massaged his face with both hands. God, he was so tired! Who had been right then, who was right now—he didn't know anymore. Truth be told, he only dimly remembered what the issues had been in the first place. He was so tired. His vision blurred, and he rubbed his eyes. "I don't know," he said dully. "I don't know anymore."

He could feel her eyes on him again, intently, but he refused to turn his head to look at her. "When the AIs took over the Orbital Towns," she said, "and offered every one of us there immortality if we'd join them, did you *really* expect me to turn them down?"

Now he turned his head to look at her, meeting her gaze levelly. "*I* would have," he said. "If it meant losing *you*."

"You really *believe* that, don't you, you sanctimonious bastard?" she said sadly. She laughed quietly, and shook her head. Czudak continued to stare at her. After a moment of silence, she reached out and took him by the arm. He could feel the warmth of her hand there, fingers pressing into his flesh, the first time she had touched him in forty years. "I miss you," she said. "Come back to me."

He looked away. When he looked around again, she was gone, without even a stirring of the air to mark her passage. Had she ever been there at all?

The places where she had touched his arm burned faintly, tingling, as if he had been touched by fire, or the sun.

He sat there, in silence, for what seemed like a very long time, geological aeons, time enough for continents to move and mountains flow like water, while the shadows shifted and afternoon gathered toward evening around him. Ellen's scent hung in the room for a long time and then slowly faded, like a distant regret. The clock was running, he knew—in more ways than one.

He had to make up his mind. He had to decide. Now. One way or the other. This was the sticking point.

He had to make up his mind.

Had it ever been so quiet, anywhere, at any time in the fretful, grinding, bloody history of the world? When he was young, he would often seek out lonely places full of holy silence, remote stretches of desert, mountaintops, a deserted beach at dawn, places where you could be contemplative, places where you could just *be*, drinking in the world, pores open . . . but now he would have welcomed the most mundane and commonplace of sounds, a dog barking, the sound of passing traffic, a bird singing, someone—a human voice!—yelling out in the street—anything to show that he was still connected to the world, still capable of bringing in the broadcast signal of reality with his deteriorating receiving set. Still alive. Still *here*. Sometimes, in the cold dead middle of the night, the shadows at his throat like razors, he would speak some inane net show on, talking heads gabbing earnestly about things he didn't care about at all, and let it babble away unheeded in the background all night long, until the sun came up to chase the graveyard shadows away, just for the illusion of company. You needed *something*, some kind of noise, to counter the silences and lonelinesses that were filling up your life, and to help distract you from thinking about what waited ahead, the ultimate, unbreakable silence of death. He remembered how his mother, in the last few decades of her life, after his father was gone, would fall asleep on the couch every night with the TV set running. She never slept in the bed, even though it was only a few feet away across her small apartment, not even closed off by a door. She said that she liked having the TV set on, "for the noise." Now he understood this. Deep contemplative silence is not necessarily your friend when you're old. It allows you to listen too closely to the disorder in your veins and the labored beating of your heart.

God, it was quiet!

He found himself remembering a trip he'd taken with Ellen a lifetime ago, the honeymoon trip they'd spent driving up the California coast on old Route 1, and how somewhere, after dark, just north of Big Sur, on the way to spend the night in a B&B in Monterey (where they would fuck so vigorously on the narrow bed that they'd tip it over, and the guy in the room below would pound on the ceiling to complain, making them laugh uncontrollably in spite of attempts to shush each other, as they sprawled on the floor in a tangle of bedclothes, drenched in each other's sweat), they pulled over for a moment at a vista-point. He remembered getting out of the car in the dark, with the invisible ocean breathing on their left, and, looking up, being amazed by how many stars you could see in the sky here, a closely packed bowl of stars surrounding you on all sides except where the darker-black against black silhouette of the hills took a bite out of it. Stars all around you, millions of them, coldly flaming, indifferent, majestic, remote. If you watched the night sky too long, he'd realized then, feeling the cold salt wind blow in off the unseen ocean and listening to the hollow boom and crash of waves against the base of the cliff far below, the chill of the stars began to seep into you, and you began to get an uneasy reminder of how vast the universe really *was*—or how small *you* were. It was knowledge you had to turn away from eventually, before that chill sank too deeply into your bones; you had to pull back from it, shrug it off, try to immerse yourself again in your tiny human life, do your best to once more wrap yourself in the conviction that the great wheel of the universe revolved around *you* instead, and that everyone else and everything else around you, the mountains, the vast breathing sea, the sky itself, were merely spear-carriers or theatrical backdrops in the unique drama of your life, a vitally important drama unlike anything that had ever gone before. . . . But once faced with the true vastness of the universe, once you'd had that chill insight, alone under the stars, it was hard to shake the realization that you were only a minuscule fleck of matter, that existed for a span of time so infinitely, vanishingly short that it couldn't even be measured on the clock of geologic time, by the birth and death of mountains and seas, let alone on the vastly greater clock that ticks away how long it takes the great flaming wheel of the Galaxy to whirl around itself, or one galaxy to wheel around another. That the shortest blink of the cosmic Eye would still be aeons too long to notice your little life at all.

Against that kind of immensity, what did "immortality" mean, for either human or machine? A million years, a day—from that perspective, they were much the same.

There was a throb of pain in his temple now. A tension headache starting? Or a stroke? It would be ironic if a blood vessel burst in his brain and killed him before he even had a chance to make up his mind.

One way or the other, time was almost up. Either his corporeal life or his terrestrial one ended today. Either way, he wouldn't be back here again. He looked slowly around the room, examining every detail, things that had been there for so long that they'd faded into the background and he didn't really *see* them anymore: a set of bronze door-chimes, hung over the back door, that he and Ellen had bought in Big Sur; an ornamental glass ball in a woven net; a big brown-and-cream vase from a cluttered craft shop in Seattle; a crockery sun-face they'd gotten in Albuquerque; a wind-up toy carousel that played "The Carousel Waltz." Familiar mugs and cups and bowls, worn smooth with age. A framed *Cirque du Soleil* poster, decades old now. One of Sam's old stuffed animals, a battered tiger with one ear drooping, tucked away on a shelf of the high kitchen cabinet, and never touched or moved again.

Strange that he had gotten rid of Ellen's photograph, ostentatiously made a point of *not* displaying it, but kept all the rest of these things, all the memorabilia of their years together—as though subconsciously he was expecting her to come back, to step back into his life as simply as she'd stepped out of it, and pick up where they'd left off. But that wasn't going to happen. If they *were* to have any life together, it would be very far away from here, and under conditions that were unimaginably strange. Would he have the courage to face that, would he have the strength to deal with starting a new life? Or was his soul too old, too tired, too tarnished, no matter what nanomagic tricks the Mechanicals could play with his physical body?

Joseph was gesturing urgently to him again, waving both arms over his head from the middle of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. He released the valet from reserve-mode, and Joseph immediately appeared beside the kitchen table, contriving somehow to look flustered. "I have this Highest Priority message for you, sir, although I don't know where it came from or how it was placed in my system. All it says is, 'You don't have much time.'"

"I know, Joseph," Czudak said, cutting him off. "It doesn't matter. I just wanted to tell you—" Czudak paused, suddenly uncertain what to say. "I just wanted to tell you that, whichever way things go, you've been a good friend to me, and I appreciate it."

Joseph looked at him oddly. "Of course, sir," he said. How much of this could he really understand? It was way outside of his programming parameters, even with adaptable learning-algorithms. "But the message—"

Czudak spoke him off, and he was gone. Just like that. Vanished. Gone. And if he was never spoken on again, would it make any difference to him? Even if Joseph had known in advance that he'd never be spoken on again, that there would be nothing from this moment on but non-existence, blankness, blackness, nothingness, would he have cared?

Czudak stood up.

As he started across the room, he realized that the time-travelers were still there. Rank on rank of them, filling the room with jostling ghosts, thousands of them, millions of them perhaps, a vast insubstantial crowd of them that he couldn't see, but that he could *feel* were there. Waiting. Watching. Watching *him*. He stopped, stunned, for the first time beginning to believe in the presence of the time-travelers as a real phenomenon, and not just a half-senile fancy of his decaying brain.

This is what they were here to see. This moment. His decision.

But why? Were they students of obscure old-recension political scandals, here to witness his betrayal of his old principles, the way you might go back to witness Benedict Arnold sealing his pact with the British or Nixon giving the orders for Watergate? Were they triumphant future descendants of the Meats, here to watch the heroic moment when he threw the Mechanicals's offer of immortality defiantly back in their teflon faces, perhaps inspiring some sort of human resistance movement? Or were they here to witness the birth of his new life after he *accepted* that offer, because of something he had *yet* to do, something he would go on to do centuries or thousands of years from now?

And who *were* they? Were they his own human descendants, from millions of years in the future, evolved into strange beings with godlike powers? Or were they the descendants of the Mechanicals, grown to a ghostly discorporate strangeness of their own?

He walked forward, feeling the watching shadows part around him, close in again close behind. He still didn't know what he was going to do. It would have been so easy to make this decision when he was young. Young and strong and self-righteous, full of pride and determination and integrity. He would have turned the Mechanicals down flat, indignantly, with loathing, not hesitating for a moment, *knowing* what was right. He already *had* done that once, in fact, long before, teaching them that they couldn't buy *him*, no matter what coin they offered to pay in! He wasn't for sale!

Now, he wasn't so sure.

Now, hobbling painfully toward the front door, feeling pain lance through his head at every step, feeling his knee throb, he was struck by a sudden sense of what it would be like to be young again—to suddenly be *young* again, all at once, in a second! To put all the infirmities and indignities of age aside, like shedding a useless skin. To feel life again, really *feel* it, in a hot hormonal rush of whirling emotions, a maelstrom of scents, sounds, sights, tastes, touch, all at full strength rather than behind an insulating wall of glass, life loud and vulgar and blaring at top volume rather than whispering in the slowly diminishing voice of a dying radio, life where you could touch it, all your nerves jumping just under your skin, rather than feeling the world pulling slowly away from you, withdrawing, fading away with a sullen murmur, like a tide that has gone miles out from the beach. . . .

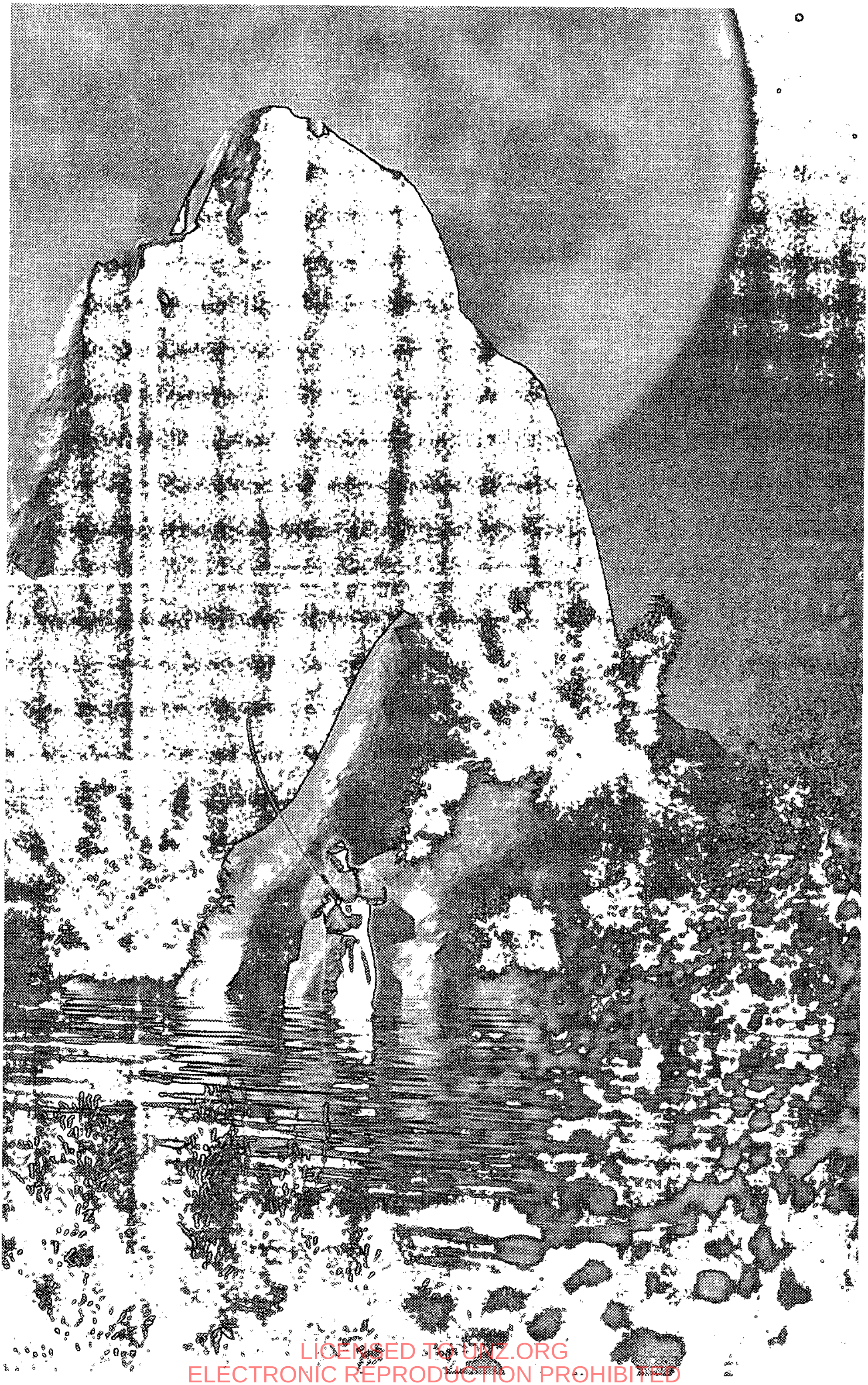
Czudak opened his front door, and stepped out onto the high white marble stoop.

The Meats had moved their demonstration over from the park, and were now camped out in front of his house, filling the street in their hundreds, blocking traffic. They were still beating their drums and blowing on their horns and whistles, although he hadn't heard anything inside the house; the Mechanical's doing, perhaps. A great wave of sound puffed in to greet him when he opened the door, though, blaring and vivid, smacking into his face with almost physical force. When he stepped out onto the stoop, the drums and horns began to falter and fall silent one by one, and a startled hush spread out over the crowd, like ripples spreading out over the surface of a pond from a thrown stone, until there was instead of noise an expectant silence made up of murmurs and whispers, noises not quite heard. And then even that almost-noise stopped, as if the world had taken a deep breath and held it, waiting, and he looked out over a sea of expectant faces, looking back at him, turned up toward him like flowers turned toward the sun.

A warm breeze came up, blowing across the park, blowing from the distant corners of the Earth, tugging at his hair. It smelled of magnolias and hyacinths and new-mown grass, and it stirred the branches of the trees around him, making them lift and shrug. The horizon to the west was a glory of clouds, hot gold, orange, lime, scarlet, coral, fiery purple, with the sun a gleaming orange coin balanced on the very rim of the world, ready to teeter and fall off. The rest of the sky was a delicate pale blue, fading to plum and ash to the East, out toward the distant ocean. The full moon was already out, a pale perfect disk, like a bone-white face peering with languid curiosity down on the ancient earth. A bird began to sing, trilling liquidly, somewhere out in the gathering darkness.

Exultation opened hotly inside him, like a wound. God, he loved the world! God, he loved life!

Throwing his head back, he began to speak. ○

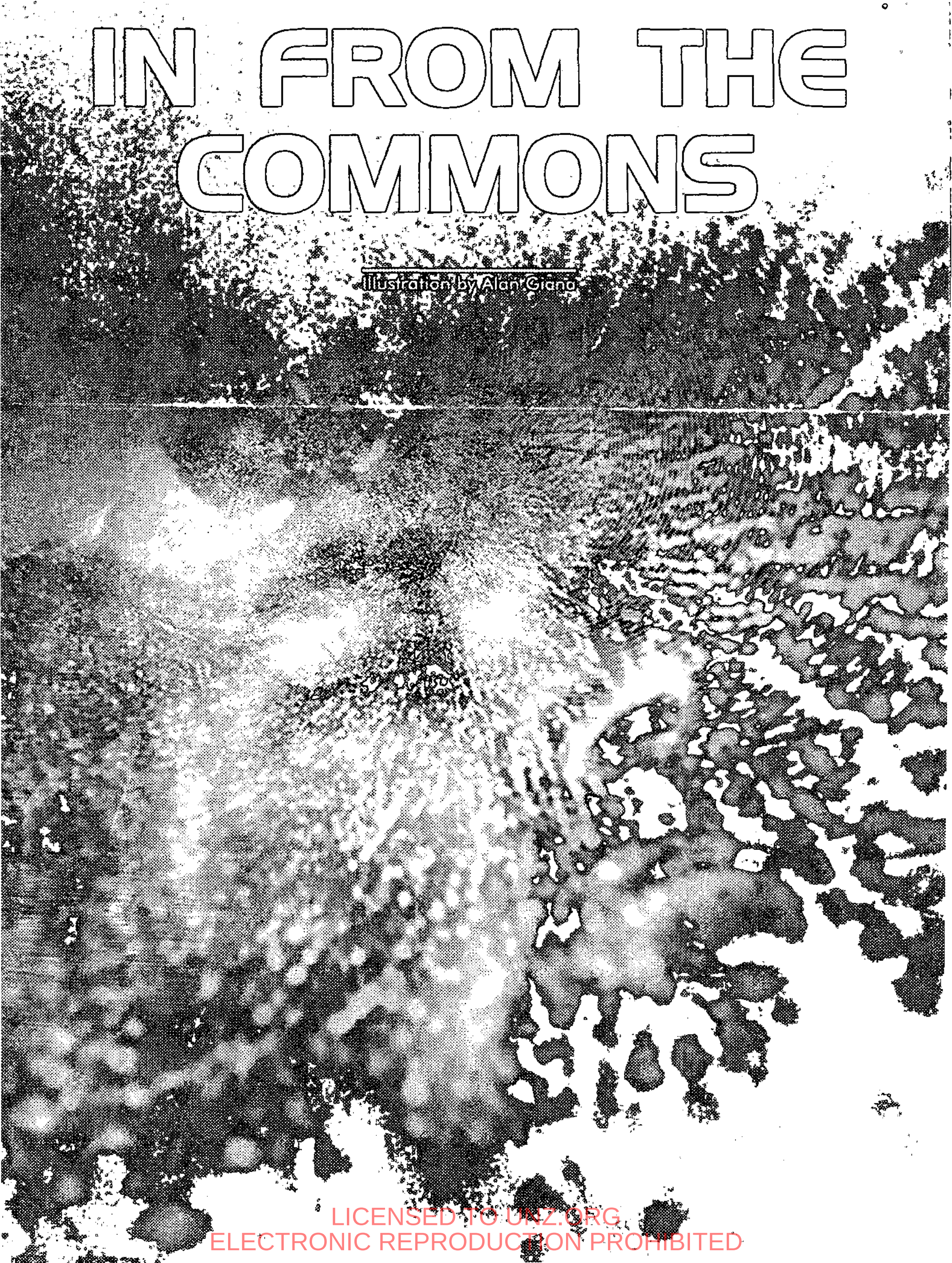


Tony Daniel

An enigmatic group of campers find their journey interrupted when they are called . . .

IN FROM THE COMMONS

Illustration by Alan Giana



In that summer when the call went out, we were in the mountains, fishing up a trout stream that flowed from the cirque lake on Paradise Peak. The sky was carbon blue and the water was very cold on our ankles and calves. There were no clouds. There was no sun that day. Everything was bright and precisely rendered. The call was a sound at first, a metallic tintinnabulation, as from a carillon. Eva looked up, but Gene was playing out his fishing line and Haller was intent on finding a lure that matched the gnats he'd seen swirling in the shadow of the stream's bank. I was sipping tea from an enamel cup.

After the sound came a green flash across the sky. Light travels more slowly than sound in the Time River mountains, of course. Then there was the smell—dandelions, crushed—and then there was the way it felt inside us. It is a strange thing to have sudden knowledge where there was none before—knowledge you neither intuited nor deduced, knowledge that is only and entirely *there,* in an instant. It is not like déjà vu or a presaging because it is not knowledge of the past or the future. It is like a sensation that comes from nowhere; it is a finger behind your eyeballs rubbing away a cataract from the backside of your vision.

Gene ceased his casting. Haller put down his hat, which was pricked with lures. I finished sipping my tea, wiped my mouth, and considered what I now knew. We were very far into the continent, into the commons. Traveling back would be an extremely long trip over changing terrain. I always knew that the call would eventually come, but I had not expected it so soon. It was something that was in the back of my mind, but something of which I never spoke. What would have been the point? It either would or would not come.

It had come.

"What do you think it means?" Eva said. She climbed from the stream, water beading and dripping from the wool of her trousers. "Are we there?"

"It'll be a long, hard trek back to find out if we are," Haller said. "We passed through the January Hills over two months ago."

After a moment, Gene began casting his line once again, settling back into his sedate, precise rhythm. His face also settled—back into its usual serenity. It was as if a small stone had been dropped into a pond, and, since it was a pond, there could be no record of the stone's perturbation of the water. That was Gene.

"We're a long way into the commons," I said. "In the cities, we'd have an address and we'd be sought out and asked whether we wanted to leave or not, but we're hidden in the ecology here. It's totally up to us to answer the call."

"It always has been," Gene said, casting, still casting.

"But we aren't trying to hide," said Eva.

"They always expected to lose part of us to the commons," Haller said, "Splitting us up was supposed to help with the problem a bit, but I heard talk of as many as three in ten not coming back."

"We *have* been here a long, long time," said Eva. "Maybe we've forgotten something important. Do we even know how to get back?"

"It isn't a question of that," Gene said, placidly. "We know where we are; Tan has kept a map."

"Yes," I said. "I have kept a good map." The map was always in my back pocket. I could feel it bunched between my rump and the rock on which I sat. It was made on beautybark paper, and I worked on it each night with a wild turkey feather stylus filled with ink of liquid moonlight, which I collected from my portable condenser. When we returned to civilization, I had thought to sell my map to finance another trip into the commons. In the cities, such artifacts were highly sought after as interpretative paradigms for sortilege and other means of divination. As any prognosticator knows, the commons are the shadow cast by all of our minds, and vice versa. In the commons, we know what we know, and that is all that there is. So, of course, the interpretation of omens is a precise and useful craft.

"I'm not going, by the way," Gene said. He did not interrupt the rhythm of his casting. "I've been thinking for a long time that I might stay."

"Oh, Gene," Eva said. "Don't decide yet, please." Eva sat down with her legs crossed on a patch of tundra grass near the stream bank. She looked at the back of Gene's head. Each of his hairs was unique and defined in the general brightness. Gene was luminous. He had achieved this long before the rest of us, even though this was the reason we had all traveled into the commons in the first place. Beatification. It was what you did while you waited. When we set out, I had not figured that he would be the first. Haller was quick and clever and Eva had a broad and synthesizing intellect. I had no expectations concerning myself, but I had thought it would happen to one of them first. In retrospect, however, it was clear that Gene was bound for beatification. He was the empiricist who took everything as it came. Over time, he had become a cavern through which all of his surroundings flowed.

"I know what I know," Gene said. "I know where I am, and *here* is where I am."

We were at altitude and so the moon was nearly full every night, since we were so near to it. I had plans to climb Paradise Peak, touch its face, and actually collect a jar of moonlight ink to take down with me. Now there was no time—not if I were to answer the call and come in from the commons.

That night, Eva unzipped the door flap and crawled into my tent after midnight. She snuggled up beside me in my sleeping bag and I felt her cool cheek against the scruff of my beard, her chilly arms warming against my chest. She had come in with only a long cotton shirt on and wool socks; a few snow crystals tickled my bare legs where she rubbed her feet against my thighs. "I've been with Haller," she said. "But Gene won't let me touch him."

"What does he say?"

"Nothing much. You know Gene. But I think he is worried about me trying to change his mind."

"I think he's letting you go," I said. "He doesn't want to make up *your* mind for you."

"Yes," Eva said, "that would be a kinder way to look at it."

"It's the best way," I said. "I don't think Gene is being selfish."

"*You're* not going to stay, are you?" She poked my ribs. "Are you, Tan?"

"I don't know yet."

"How could you even think of that. If you don't come, then none of us can. You're the *pilot!*"

"I'm just the surface shine," I said. "Our spokesman to the world. If I don't come, Haller could do the job just as well."

"Haller needs to do the calculating, Tan. He wouldn't have time to do his work."

She unzipped my sleeping bag so she could sit up, then climbed onto my stomach.

"And what about me?" she said. "I'm meant for intimacy, to ease the solitude. Do you want our deepest feelings to go about in the world exposed?"

She undid her cotton blouse and let it fall from her shoulders. Her breasts hung before me like two moons. I touched them and imagined I was touching the moon, as I had wanted to for so long. I wanted to touch the moon, but the call had come and now I would never be able to do that if I answered it.

"You act like you didn't hear the call," she said. "Didn't you hear it, Tan?"

"Oh, I heard it. I have it in me still, just as you do."

"But why is there any question whatsoever about going back?"

She moved back on me and pushed me inside her, where I grew like a melon vine after rain.

"You *want* to go back with me, don't you?" She moved back and forth on me, pushing me deeper.

"Don't ask me that now," I said. "I'll do anything you want *now*."

She laughed and we made love in that way. I came as I suckled Eva's breasts. I was thinking of moonlight and the glamour of the night. For that moment only, I forgot about the call. Then we were lying together, side by side, and I remembered.

In the morning, Gene grilled us a trout he had caught while fishing at sun up. Today there was a blue-green sun, and it was a traveling one, west to east. It cast long morning shadows across the rocky tundra basin where we were camped. We ate the trout on metal plates and it fell apart, scalding and delicious, in our mouths. We drank hot tea and chased it with clear water from the stream.

"I thought of an argument," Haller said. His words were directed at no one in particular, but we all knew he was talking to Gene. "Do you agree that better people have better dogs?"

A ripple of interest passed over Gene's face. He took another bite of his trout.

"Think about it," said Haller. "Good people, on average, choose nicer, smarter dogs. But there is a dog overpopulation problem in the cities. So all the people of good will have their dogs spayed or neutered."

"Yes," said Gene. "I suppose."

"But what *that* does is take more and more of the good dogs out of the breeding pool, while the bad dogs belonging to bad owners keep multiplying."

"Yep."

"So you end up with a dog population that gets meaner and meaner and dumber and dumber."

"On average," I said.

"Yes," said Haller, "on average."

Gene took a long sip of tea, considered. "The good dogs are dead, but I'm not," he said. "And I'm not a dog. It's *you* who are going somewhere else, you know. I'm just going fishing."

That day, I heard thunder rising from the plains below. People were coming in from the commons down there and the tramp of their feet and the rustle of their clothes was what made the rumble I heard rising from the gray void below us. As soon as the day warmed, the light from the plains would rise and the images coalesce. The sight of the people on the move would bubble up to us.

I took out my map and spent the day studying it. Haller and Eva took down the tents, all but Gene's, and loaded their packs. Eva was humming a tune, and after a while I recognized it from yesterday as the carillon melody of the call's leading edge.

That night I walked to the stream. I heard a clinking noise and looked downstream. By the light of the moon, I saw Gene. He was standing knee deep in the water. He had a pan from the camp cookset in his hands, and he was panning in the silt of the stream bottom. He raised the pan up, swirled it about, then bent to bring up another plate of sand.

I watched him for a while, and then I spilled all the condensed moonlight I had gathered into the stream. It flowed uphill against the current of the water—back toward its source, which hung over Paradise Peak immense and globose. And, for me, unreachable. I would answer the call.

We said goodbye to Gene on a rocky outcropping about a mile from our last camp. At some point last night, he had stopped panning the stream and had gone to Eva's tent. They emerged together from it in the morning. Eva was now carrying away a little of Gene inside her, both physically and emotionally, and seemed less distraught to be leaving him behind.

We all shook hands.

"Well," I said. I took out my map. "For the moment, it's mostly a matter of climbing down."

"I have something for you," Gene said. "For all of you."

He pulled a bandanna from his pocket and unwrapped it. Inside the fabric were three fly-fishing lures. He gave one to each of us. I laid my lure in the palm of my hand.

"One day you may come back to the commons," Gene said. "And you may want to find me."

"Of course we will find you," Haller said.

Eva was clutching her lure and was crying.

"They'll disappear when we leave," she said.

"Don't worry about that," Gene said, and gave her a freshly washed bandanna to wipe her tears. "Nothing will be lost."

I looked down at my lure. It was an exquisite thing of feather and bone. And in the center was a moonstone. Well, a moon-pebble, actually, hardly bigger than a grain of sand. So that was what he'd been panning for. They were extremely rare, and only found in these high lands.

"All day yesterday I was thinking about what each of you would look like to me," Gene said, "from the other side. The way a fish sees a mayfly above the water."

"So this is me," I said, folding my palm over the lure.

"Yes, Tan."

"And this is me," said Eva.

"And me," Haller said.

"No matter what I become while you're gone," Gene said. "These will always draw me back to you."

We trekked down from the mountains into snow that later became a steady rain. Our hot breath formed a foggy haze about us so that we seemed to be continually walking out of a cloud. The stream veered away and then rejoined us at various times, and at the bottom of the last alluvial hill, it emptied out into the river. Our canoes were where we'd left them, hidden in some willows. We secured the gear and took the boats out into the current.

We were a fortnight on the Time River. We had been nearly a month and a half paddling up it. After the river turned against the January Hills, we grounded the canoes. The January Hills had not been here when everyone first arrived. They had risen over time as people had walked through them. Most of the trails cut straight through the hills in straight lines along gorges that were nearly a mile deep in places.

We came out of the January Hills into the vineyards on the outskirts of the Interport City. The last of those who were answering the call emerged with us, and we walked together, eating grapes and drinking from the caches of young red wine that the grape growers had left for those who would come behind them. After we had passed, the wilderness would reclaim these lands and the commons would flow back into civilization once again.

We arrived at the port fifty days after we'd left Gene in the mountains. The sea was the mottled green of a spread of lichen. There were wheelbarrows and hospital gurneys, which people had used to cart the infirm down to the waters, all along the boardwalk margin. I lashed my map to a rusted anchor I'd dragged from a ruined wharf nearby to keep the map from floating up and away, back to the moon. I buried it beneath a stand of six palm trees several hundred feet from the beach and marked the spot with a stack of gurneys and a wheelbarrow on top. This was mild Resolution Gulf, and no storms would disturb my monument.

At sunset of the fifty-first day—it was a day of a traveling east-west sun—Haller, Eva, and I went down to the beach.

"I have something to tell you both," Eva said. "Before we go in."

"What is it?" Haller asked, but I had already guessed. I was Eva's confidante, the one to whom she brought her doubts and frustrations, and she always told me when she had her period. She hadn't told me.

"Is it Gene's?" I said. I stared out at the sparkling surf and smiled.

"What?" said Haller. He bit his lips, thought for a moment. "Oh. I see."

"It's Gene's," Eva said. "I used a potion that last night. I'd been preparing it for days." She looked at me and winked. "You aren't the only alchemist among us; I have learned a craft of my own, you know."

"And that," Haller said, "may be a neat solution to the problem of the bad dogs. If the baby somehow comes along with us."

"Yes," Eva said. "I suppose you could think of it that way. But what will it mean—after we answer the call?"

"Surely only good will come of this," I said. "But let's go and find out."

We held hands, Eva between Haller and me, and walked naked across the sand, returning the way we had come forth: naked, except that each of us had in our hands the fishing lure that Gene had given us. I could feel Eva's lure pressed against my skin where she held my palm.

The water was warm, as it should be with the sun sinking into it like a hot stone and heating it up. We stood in the lap of the waves and watched the top of the sun disappear, steaming and red, beneath the ocean in the west.

"Do you think it will be the same dream we left before," Eva said, "or another one?"

"*This* is the dream," Haller said. "I thought we were straight on that."

"I wouldn't be so sure," I told him, "of anything."

We walked into the sea, and it covered us over, and we breathed in the water and drowned.

I rose from the holding casket and stretched. After a moment, my eyes cleared. After another moment, I had feeling in my fingers and toes. The others were standing near me, also stretching and yawning. Grooming robots hovered near us and the whisk of their vacuuming wands sucked away the dandruff of dry skin cells that sloughed from us in tiny avalanches.

"Aaah," I said, priming my vocal cords as I'd been taught. So were the others.

"Aaaah," we all said. "Aaah, aaah."

I turned to the nearest robot. "What time is it?" I asked.

"Two-thirty P.M." it said, "November 19, 23,596 A.D. Thursday."

"Thank you," I said. "Did you say Thursday?"

"Yes."

"How far are we from Earth?"

"Just under two hundred lightyears. West, along the short arm of the Milky Way, of course."

"Of course. That was the way we were headed when I went to sleep. Eleven thousand years ago."

"We have found a very nice planet," said the robot. "I have been instructed, sir, to ask you if you feel that mental reintegration is complete."

"Come again?"

"During the lengthy virtual dreaming stage of our journey, your mentality was separated out to prevent systemic deterioration and the random creep of neurosis that a journey of such a time scale might induce. A side effect was the possibility that some portions of you might fail to reintegrate. Might settle, so to speak." The robot shot a puff of air over me as a final touch in the cleaning. "How are you? Are you quite re-mixed and stable, sir?"

I rubbed my eyes, blinked several times. "I . . . don't know about that," I said.

"In that case, sir, I have been instructed by the ship's mind to ask you to look at your hand."

"Look at my hand?"

"Yes, sir. The ship's consensus virtuality bids you to have a look at your left hand. While you were asleep, some mild genetic restructuring was performed by the sleeping casket mechanism."

I glanced down. There, in my left palm, were the three lures. They seemed to be embedded just beneath the surface, but I touched them with my right index finger and they actually *were* the surface. If you looked closely, you could see that each lure was made from my own skin. There were tiny capillaries of blood flowing through them. Three signs of contentment—lost or gained? I could not say.

I could feel them, Haller and Eva, within me, in a way I never could before the voyage, before we journeyed into the commons. I was conscious of being a *voice,* their voice, as I'd never been conscious of it before. And the voice of the other, the new one, growing with the part of me that was Eva. Little Gene. Who knew what strange aspect he would add to the totality of our personality when he came into his own. What was I going to become?

Something that had not been before. When the time came, would I have the words to say what it was like being me?

But, for now, there were other things that needed doing, and the one thing Tan—me—*was* good at was taking care of the business of the moment. I am the ego, after all. Those within me need me to speak and to act for them. That's why I came out from the commons. Otherwise, I might have stayed. I was very happy there.

And I almost touched the moon.

I went forward to see where we were. A robot stood at the helm, where it had stood for thousands of years, ready to adjust the course if the helm veered from true. It had not veered. The tiny singularity that supplied our gravity had neither disappeared nor engulfed us. All the machinery had done its job; we had found the place for which we were looking. I walked past the robot and gazed out the viewport.

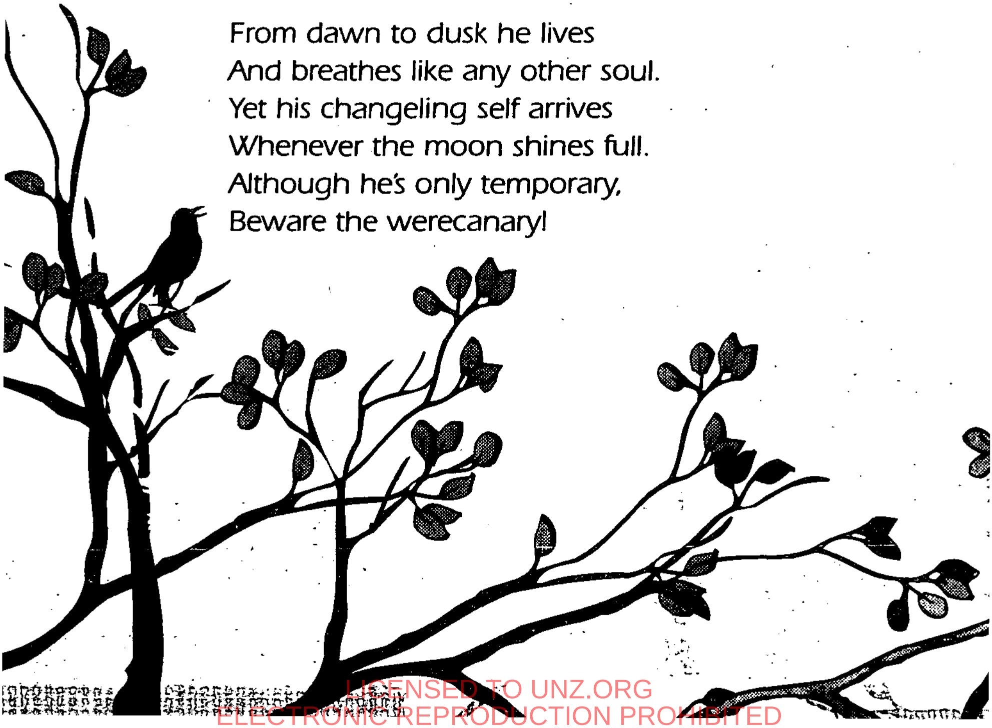
The planet *was* a beautiful place, at least from up here. And though a part of me was going down there soon, a part of me would always stay above it all—the old man in the moon, hanging tranquilly in the sky, no matter what might befall those below. It was a funny way for people to end up after all these years.

"The ship's mind bids you good morning, sir," said the robot at the helm. "It says to wish you . . . good fishing."

"Good morning," I said, still considering the planet below us. "Good morning, Gene. From the rest of you." ○

BEWARE THE WERECANARY!

From dawn to dusk he lives
And breathes like any other soul.
Yet his changeling self arrives
Whenever the moon shines full.
Although he's only temporary,
Beware the werecanary!



Feathers sprout along his cheeks.
His arms transform to wings.
His lips soon turn into a beak
And then he starts to sing.
You won't find him in an aviary.
Beware the werecanary!

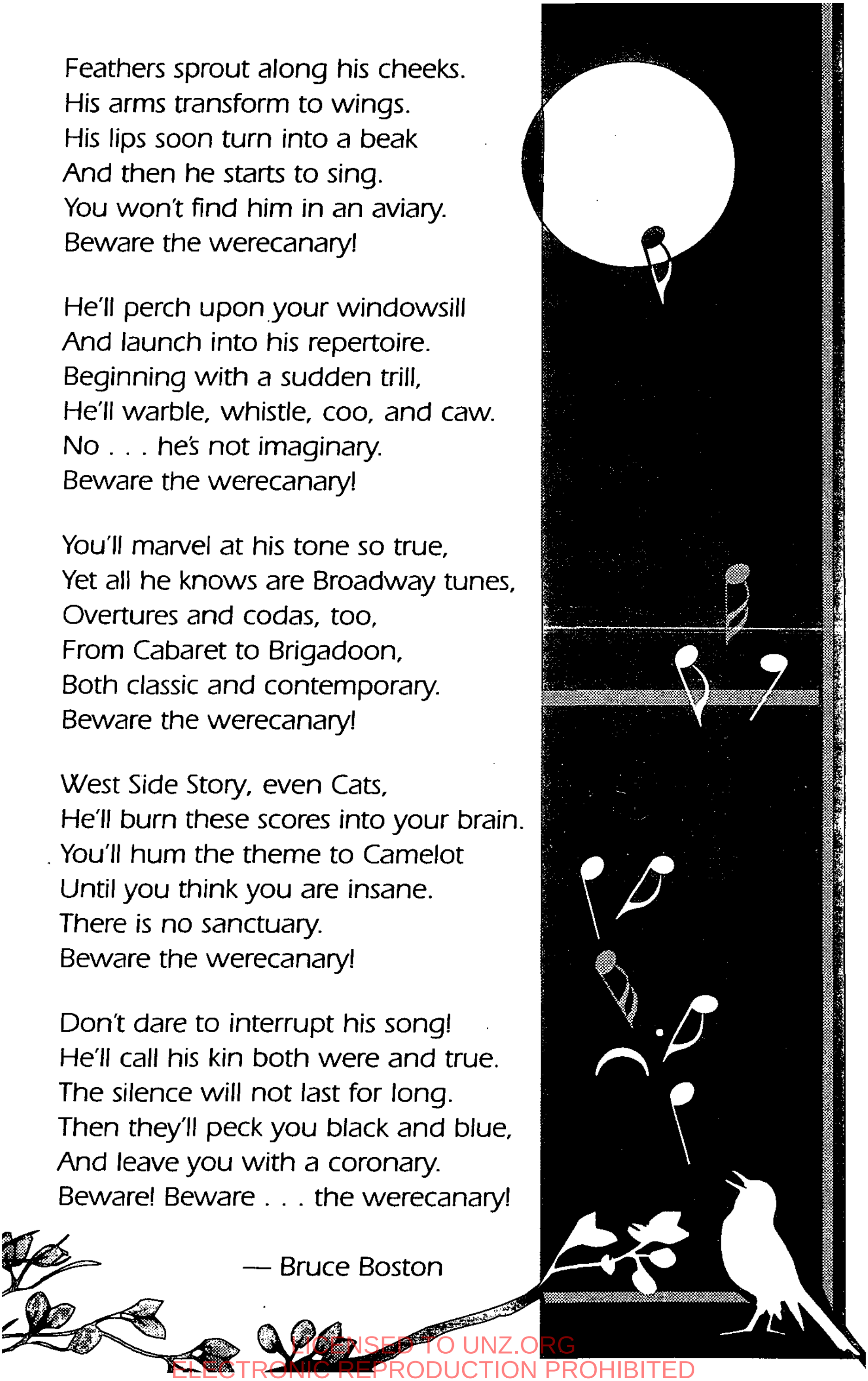
He'll perch upon your windowsill
And launch into his repertoire.
Beginning with a sudden trill,
He'll warble, whistle, coo, and caw.
No . . . he's not imaginary.
Beware the werecanary!

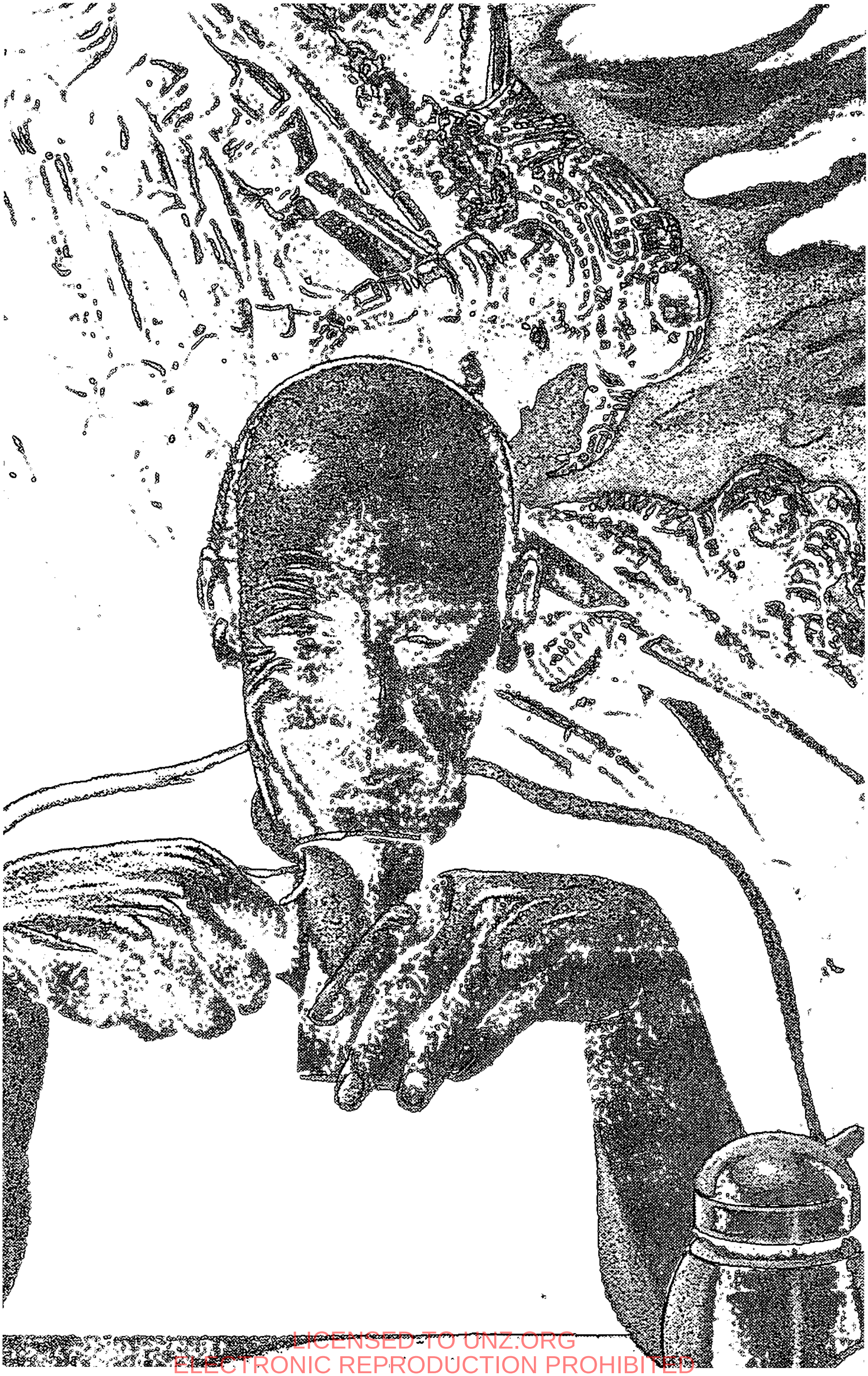
You'll marvel at his tone so true,
Yet all he knows are Broadway tunes,
Overtures and codas, too,
From Cabaret to Brigadoon,
Both classic and contemporary.
Beware the werecanary!

West Side Story, even Cats,
He'll burn these scores into your brain.
You'll hum the theme to Camelot
Until you think you are insane.
There is no sanctuary.
Beware the werecanary!

Don't dare to interrupt his song!
He'll call his kin both were and true.
The silence will not last for long.
Then they'll peck you black and blue,
And leave you with a coronary.
Beware! Beware . . . the werecanary!

— Bruce Boston



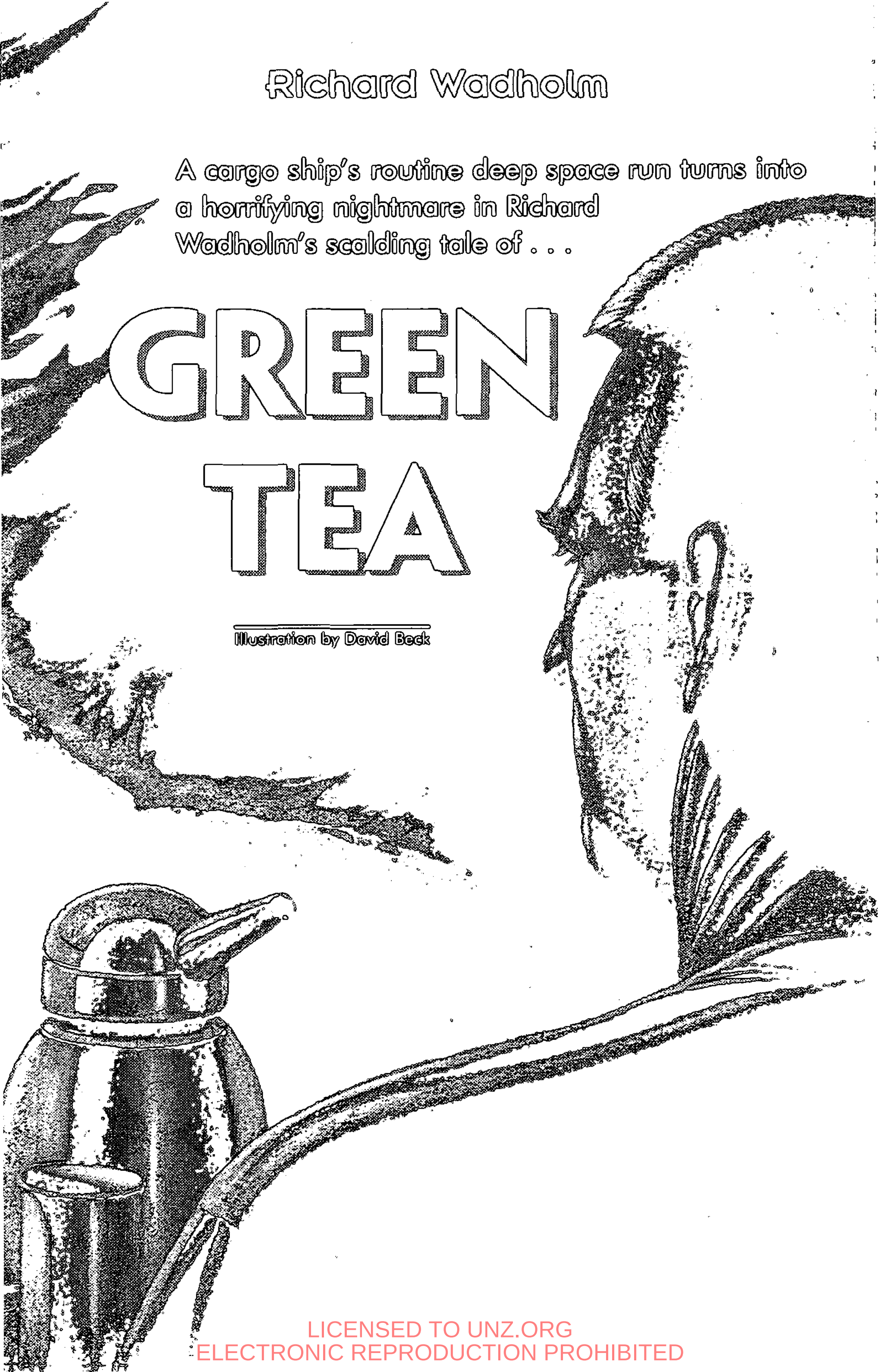


Richard Wadholm

A cargo ship's routine deep space run turns into a horrifying nightmare in Richard Wadholm's scalding tale of . . .

GREEN TEA

Illustration by David Beck



Friend Beltran, this moment has weighed on me for the past six days. At last we meet.

Will you take tea with me? Not to worry, I am not here to poison you with tainted tea. Not from a beautiful service like this, certainly. This tea kettle is pewter, yes? And the brew pot—terra cotta, in the manner of the great smuggling mandarins of the Blanco Grande? Quite so. I must beg your indulgence for its use. I was very thirsty; I have come a long way to see you.

Perhaps my name escapes you. That is the way in this profession we share. Say that I am your delivery man. Indeed, the item you procured at such dear cost is close to hand.

My fee? Whatever you arranged with the navigator Galvan will suffice. A cup of tea from this excellent terra cotta pot would do nicely. And, if you are not too pressed, the answer to a simple question?

Who was it for, the thing you birthed on our ship? Was it for the mercenaries on Michele D'avinet? Or for the Chinese smugglers who used the glare of D'avinet to hide their passing?

I suppose it doesn't matter much either way. Whoever your treasure was intended for, they were *someone's* enemy, but they were no enemy of Beltran Seynoso's, yes? And we, the crew of the *Hierophant,* we were merely witnesses. Our only offense was that we could connect you with the destruction of a little star in the outer reaches of Orion.

I wronged you, my friend. You are indeed a man of pitiless resolve. Sitting here, making tea in your kitchen, in this rambling manse, on this pretty little moon of yours, I underestimated you. I pictured a dilettante, playing at a rough game.

Forgive, forgive.

That story you told our captain, that you represented an Anglo syndicate dealing in—what was it? April pork bellies? We took that for naïveté. No one goes from trading in April pork bellies to dealing in Tuesday morning perbladium. Not even the Anglos.

And then there was that improbable load you hired us to turn.

Do you recall the terms of our arrangement, on the floor of the Bright Matter Exchange in Santa Buenaventura? Our contract called for 1200 pennyweight of perbladium to be bombarded by heavy tungsten ions for 14 hours. The result was supposed to be equal amounts of morghium 414 and commercial grade protactinium.

You recall? Morghium 414! *Los Abuelitos!* Hardly fitting for a ship like the *Hierophant.* Once we might have passed on such paltry fare. Indeed, Mateo Diaz, the captain of the *Hierophant,* laughed as we took your load into space. We in the vane crews laughed as we loaded your job into our targeting shelves.

Why would somebody pay for the use of the starboard vane—always the hot vane on any ship—to turn a mild-mannered little isotope used only by metallurgists? Captain Diaz took you for some sort of cerezadito, just starting out in the commodities market.

Oh, you are very good, Señor Seynoso. My compliments.

Not all of us were fooled. I had a friend, a very dear friend, on the *Hierophant's* nuclear chemistry committee. She doubted the decay chain you provided us even before we committed your load to space.

She led me along the chain of isotopes as you had outlined the order of their appearance. Perbladium 462 would indeed transmutate to morghium and protactinium, but only under very idealized circumstances.

Her calculations said your load would turn to unmarketably small amounts of junk isotopes. She was afraid you didn't know what you were doing.

She need not have worried on that score. Between you and our ship's high-speed navigator—whose services you cheaply bought—you knew precisely what you were doing.

No, don't apologize. I am congratulating you: Well played, Sir.

I was chief to the crew that packed the target material for your load. I spent ten hours with it, hauling it out to its own special quadrant of the starboard vane, injecting it into a section of lead and boron-lined target ampoules; sealing each dram over with paraffin, to control the speed of the particles bombarding your treasure.

If anyone should have known what you were doing, it should have been me, yes? I was the perfect foil. Like all cuckolds, my confidence in my own ability was paramount.

We came in off the starboard vane after we finished and Esteban Contreras asked my opinion about piggy-backing a load of thaogol around this benign little load of morghium.

Esteban had already talked to the nuclear chemistry committee, and they had all given their approval. All except for my friend, Frances Cruz. She had doubts.

But I knew Frances very well. I knew she was a cautious person. Cautious, quiet, thoughtful. I added up my cut for anything Contreras sold in Buenaventura. I told him to go ahead with his scheme.

You see, my friend? I am in no position to cast blame; you and I share responsibility for everything that followed.

Unfortunate that Contreras himself can't be here to speak with you. He had a great belief in the catalytic power of sheer human Will. You and your remorseless skill would have proven something to him that he dearly wished to believe in.

But Esteban Contreras and his Hot Shots were out on the vane, loading their thaogol targets, when your jewel took its first turn.

I was up in the bridge tower, what we in the fleet call the Heidelburgh Tun. I had my eye on a wall full of particle detectors, waiting for a sign of disaster. In this way, Contreras and I had watched out for each other since our cerezadito days.

But disaster is supposed to announce itself in neutron showers, or gamma rays, or a huge heat ramp. The first warning your treasure gave me was nothing more than the burr of a pencil on my desktop.

Few would take notice of such a trifle. Only a lifetime among the big ships of the fleet Buenaventura teaches one to see the signs and read them for what they are: Some vibration had passed through the ship from dorsal to keel, touching every little tea cup and paper clip on its way. It was the subtle harmonic of a nuclear excursion.

I opened a channel to Contreras. I called to him to get off the vane. Contreras had just time to call my name, and then . . .

Are you listening, friend Beltran? Do you hear them?

You must not shy away now. We are hard men, you and I. We take what we want and we do not flinch from the sad and human business of dying. The young mother who will never see her sons grow up—*unfortunate,* we say. *Business is business.* The youth who prays to his patron saint to end his suffering—we reckon this heart-breaking. The old veteran who growls her agony through clenched teeth—*tragic and heroic.*

Would that it were unnecessary.

Steady-on, friend Beltran. Tears and remorse won't bring them back now, will they? And we have far to go.

I was with Captain Diaz as he searched for the source of the screams. I studied the particle detectors as half the starboard vane crumbled under the weight of some unknown force. And then the monitors and detectors themselves began to go, one by one all across the starboard vane, like votives being snuffed out by a choir boy. In a moment, Captain Diaz and I found ourselves in silence and darkness.

Were the Hot Shots all dead? Had some of them made their way into the compartments underneath the starboard vane? Maybe they were out there still, burning to death in some tight space, waiting for us to come for them.

We have all thought about being in that place, Señor Seynoso. Do you see?

We have all seen compañeros walk out of anaerobic fires, their skin cauterized to the inside of their hotsuits. We have all fetched water for someone so burned they could feel nothing but the unquenchable thirst. We do not leave people behind to die that way.

The monitors told a horrendous tale—Spot temperatures were above 2,000 Kelvins, 130 Tesla magnetic fields had buckled 100 ton deck plates all across the dorsal- and ventral-side vanes.

My crew could have stayed in the ship. They had spent ten hours on the vane, and were not scheduled to go out again for another two shifts. No one would have said a word to them.

I made this clear when I explained the situation. Without a word, my mates returned to their armorers and prepared themselves. You should have seen them, those people who died for you. Hard as money, my crew. Hard as coin.

Our good trust rested with Katherine Pope, an Anglo from one of the little worlds along the French Violet. She specialized in "action at a distance." She had a microwave torch with a collimated radar sight. Normal times, we called upon her to burn small portions of hot metal into gas, for spectrographic analysis at a safe remove. On rare occasions, we called upon her to melt hot metal out of its critical configuration.

You might not have cared for Pope, had you met her. Pope had the temperament of an artist, the arrogance of a diva in a chorus line. We always seemed to be distracting her from something more important. Yet all who knew her work bore her high-handed ways.

Mister Robinson was my second. He ran the crew of false men who interceded for us in the tight spaces. He was a taciturn and disapproving man. Not easy to be around always, but we had been together twelve years and I never doubted my back when he was near.

He had two assistants with him. The more experienced was a young aesthete named Pablo Sanoro. Pablo was the son of Luz Sanoro, the wet dock contractor. He held the splendid air of a young noble working out his summer in some Arcadian vineyard. He was ever gracious and kind. He made a point of joking and chatting up the older man. This always led to his rebuke.

Pablo's charms were not entirely lost. Mister Robinson had taken on an apprentice as we shipped out of Buenaventura. Rosalie Nuñez was a cerezadita from mechanics school, brought in to replace Eduardo Callé, who had died of burns the previous week. Mister Robinson intimidated her, as I suspect he did Pablo and most people. But she was determined to make her place on our crew, and so she stood up to his sarcasm and silent moods. Pablo Sanoro had cheered her on.

One other person is most relevant to this history. But for Frances Cruz, I might have foregone the trip out to this sleepy little plantation of yours.

She was our liaison with the nuclear chemistry group, a serious young woman, who loved jokes, but never knew how to tell any of her own.

She did not seem fretful as we prepared to go out. She was gay and easy. She kidded with my crew, and gave a sisterly hug to Mister Robinson's new mechanic. She was, in short, completely unlike herself.

I took her aside as the others spread on their electrolytic salves and locked themselves into their armor. I asked her what was wrong. She handed me the spectrographs taken from the burning shelf on the starboard vane.

It was not completely blank, of course. There were lines of titanium and iron from the burning deck, carbon from the diamond superstructure, sodium from burst-open coolant pipes.

All the things one expects in a ship-board catastrophe, save one—

What exactly was burning?

Frances had an idea. She showed me a photograph of the sky above the starboard vane. I didn't know what I was looking at until she drew an imaginary ring. Outside the ring, the stars shone plain and hard, as always. Inside they burned fat and over-bright.

"Gravitational lensing," she explained.

I tried to think of something that could bend light waves so hard. "Are you talking about a black hole?" I asked her. "Some sort of gravitational singularity?"

She shook her head at this. "Not a black hole. A black hole would have killed us quick. Whatever is out there seems intent on killing us slowly."

"So, not a black hole. But something dense enough to bend light."

"I can't tell you more; I'm guessing as it is." She bit her lower lip in a way I had come to know very well. "Here," she said. "In case you get a bruise." She put something in my hand and fled the armory.

It was her ritual of good fortune to give me a child's adhesive bandage as I went out on the vane—her way of telling me to be careful. On this day, she pressed something larger into my hand. I still have it with me, you see?

A box of bandages.

You grow uneasy, my friend.

Perhaps you are anxious for this tea water to boil? I believe tea has to be prepared as the Chinese drink it, which is to say, scalding. I was taught this by an old smuggler up in the Blanco Grande.

Frances used to worry all this boiling water would do some grievous injury to my throat. She was not the appreciator of fine teas that you and I are. Her tastes ran to the simple and the sweet, I'm afraid.

Sometimes I wonder what brought us together. Perhaps I saw something a bit reckless in her, I don't know. I laugh to think what Frances imagined she saw in me. A man of decency beneath the rage? A man of honesty beneath the lies, compassion beneath the avarice?

You will find this most amusing—because I could not bear to let her down, *I would have been that man.* I can hardly bring myself to admit it now. Had things turned out otherwise, Frances and I would be on a little plantation like this one. I would be sitting out on that veranda, a happy fool rocking children to sleep in my lap.

You spared me this embarrassing decline, you and your undertaking. I will not forget that, my friend. You have my word.

I placed Frances' talisman into my forearm kit as we loaded our gear and false men onto a little cargo train that ran across the starboard vane.

We set out through the tiny valleys of production grade isotopes that clustered on every side of the ship's hull. Our way into battle was lighted by tubes of flawless manufactured diamond, filled with target isotopes of cesium and cobalt in a liquid suspension. *El Camino Azul,* we called it—"the Blue Highway."

The Blue Highway zigzagged past railheads and loading cranes, all untouched by the catastrophe just beyond our sight. The scene was oddly quiet. The rail line was intact here. The screams had stopped. Rosalie Nuñez suggested that things were not so bad. Might Contreras and his Hot Shots have found a place of refuge?

No one dared answer; to acknowledge such baseless hope invited bad luck. Yet her optimism hung in the air as we entered a small canyon filled with low-level actinides.

It was here that the landscape began to deform under the compulsion of your treasure.

A rack of headlights glared at us from the back of the canyon. Pablo Sanoro pointed. "A tractor!" he cried. "It's the Hot Shots!" He gave Nuñez an encouraging nudge. "Maybe things really aren't so bad."

He called out to them and waved. The headlights did not move. We came around to the back of the strontium shelves, Mister Robinson switched on a spotlight.

All the hopeful chatter died away. Someone swore. Pablo Sanoro started to shush the blasphemer, till he realized it was Nuñez herself.

The headlights did indeed belong to a tractor. Perhaps it was the Hot Shots' tractor. I could not say from looking. The machine had been squeezed into the open end of an abandoned sodium reservoir.

Press your thoughts, friend Beltran—twenty-five tons of steel and titanium tucked into a crevice the size of a baby's coffin. Here was a missive from your beast, a foretaste of what awaited us.

A silence fell upon my crew as we rolled past the collapsed tractor. Then Pope and Robinson fell into wagering over the nature of a creature that could crush a twenty-five ton tractor into a sodium conduit.

"Echnesium!" declared Pope. "It radiates mediating particles for the electroweak force. I've seen echnesium sweep a vane with riptides of magnetic force, drawing in everything in its wake—ferrous and non-ferrous metals alike. Molten steel, hundreds of degrees beyond the currie point of iron. Lead. Flesh, even."

Mister Robinson looked at me to see if I was hearing this. "Echnesium has earned its place among the Seven Dreads, but how can echnesium isolate its fury so fine as to suck a tractor into a coolant pipe?"

"I've seen echnesium focus its rage finer than that," Pope declared. She recounted the tale of a cerezadito she had known on the *Ten of Swords*. The lad favored a steel mustache bangle. He wore it the day he walked into an echnesium fire,and gave not a thought to steel's magnetic properties.

"I found him during the next shift," Pope said, "with his face pressed to a ferro-ceramic bulkhead, and his ornament working its way out of his left ear."

Nuñez gasped. Robinson waved his hand, unimpressed.

"Easy to push a little metal through a kid's brain," he said. "It's something else to stuff a tractor into a coolant pipe."

Pablo Sanoro appealed to all of us for decorum. He nodded toward Nuñez, who sat quiet and awe-struck at the back of the train.

Pope raised her chin at Mister Robinson. "If it's not echnesium, then what?"

"A quantum vacuum state," Robinson said. "Bound inside the heavy nuclei of some metallic plasma. Vacuum^3, perhaps," Robinson suggested. "Bound inside one of the more stable isotopes of pterachnium."

Nuñez gave me an uneasy look. Perhaps she longed for reassurance. But I had my mind on Contreras and his Hot Shots, and where I feared they might be. One of the false men ended up explaining the concept of quantum vacuum states for her.

"What we call 'vacuum' in this universe is actually a morass of self-annihilating virtual particle pairs. They pop into existence, find each other, and pop out of existence in a suicidal frenzy. But more perfect states of vacuum are possible, and they adhere to their own laws and start-up values. Vacuum^3, for instance, allows a small portion of these virtual particles to pop into existence unpaired with any anti-particle to annihilate. Left over, these begin to accumulate."

Pope nudged at Robinson—*where did you pick this one up?*

"Do you know how much mass you're talking about?" she asked. "Sixteen nanoseconds, the mass of these particles would sink an astronomical chunk of space into a singularity."

The false man—we called him *El Guapo,* "the Handsome One," straightened in a show of dignity. "Actually, many of these exotic states radiate the particles as fast they appear." It knew she was laughing at it. It turned about, looking for allies. "Really, I would have thought someone in your profession would find this more relevant."

Nuñez looked around at all of us. "What does that mean? We might be facing a black hole?"

"It's probably a bit of plutonium, burning itself off," I said.

"Vacuum^4 more likely," said Robinson, who did not stint on the truth in unpleasant matters. "What do you say, Mister Seguro? Vacuum^4 radiates magnetic monopoles. That would explain the tractor in the coolant pipe."

"You have monopoles between your ears," Pope derided him.

"Monopoles catalyze proton decay. And that, in turn—"

"We're getting carried away here," I said. "We don't know what's at the back of the vane till we see it for ourselves."

Pope nodded at me. "What about you? I recall a time you could have told us what we faced without a second thought."

I looked into the eyes of Nuñez, round with terror. Even Sanoro looked abashed.

"Perhaps my powers are slipping," I said. "We've got enough to think about right here."

And we did. While we had argued over the precise nature of your treasure, the rail line had angled into a tunnel and brought us down to the region of the undervane.

* * *

No mechanic likes the undervane at a time like this. Ask a sailor on the ocean the last place he wants to be when his ship is rolling hard—few things play worse on the mind than being trapped below decks in a foundering ship.

And yet, if Esteban Contreras lived, this is where heat and radiation would have pursued him, to the last place any sane person would go.

We entered a dim and smoldering realm. All mechanical illumination was gone. The vast twilight between us and the distant perimeter of the starboard vane was a grotto of cherry red stalactites, flaming gases, red rivers of steel, glowing like dogs' eyes at dusk.

We called out for Contreras on our suit radios. Nothing came back but the hoarse roar of static. We waited, called out again. There was no response. We searched for some sign of the Hot Shots on every part of the spectrum. Nothing lay before us but a flood plain of magma, flowing down from the inferno at the back of the vane.

"We need a vantage point," Mister Robinson said. I found a raised siding. Before the excursion, it had connected the hot vaults at the bottom of the undervane to a quadrant of target shelves on the deck. A giant airlock sealed the two worlds off from each other. But ferocious heat had warped the bulkhead till it was frozen in its track. The rail line leading up to it was washed over. A torrent of metal sludge and debris had formed a natural waterfall from the mouth of the tunnel, across the tracks, over the edge of the siding and into the dark.

Here, we listened for some sign of the Hot Shots.

In the tenuous atmosphere venting from a thousand coolant pipes the ship banged and ticked all around us. We heard no human sound. I slammed on the rail with a target shelf key. Big as a man's leg, they are. Anyone alive down here would have felt a tremor pass through the deck.

Nothing came back to us but the groans of super-heated metal.

As we waited for some sign from Contreras, a breach opened in the sullen darkness to our left. Molten steel, the remains of one of the giant cracking stations on the surface, poured across the rail line just behind us.

The rear car was swamped before we realized what had happened. It carried all but one of Mister Robinson's false men. The motor car, where we sat, was engulfed up to the gunwales. Heat exploded up through the floor.

We were hard against it, compañero. The train began to lurch backward in a series of uneven jerks as the brakes gave way to the heat. Someone pleaded with me to call back to the ship for help.

"No one is coming after us," I said. "That's how ships lose two or three crews to a single disaster."

"But we'll die—"

"Shut up," I said. I needed to think.

Whoever it was, they started to argue. Without preamble, Mister Robinson threw them over the side. Surprise—the whiner turned out to be the Handsome One. Programmed to human emotion not wisely but too well.

A silence descended on the crew. It lasted for a moment, but one moment was all I needed.

The whistle of escaping gas led my gaze to a small aperture to one side of the airlock. Stars glimmered beyond the hole.

It was far too tiny to squeeze through in a hot suit, but it implied hope; perhaps the lock was not jammed so tight as it looked.

We had a vane mule locked against the front of the train. The mule was roughly the size and shape of an elevator car, with eight nimble legs per side. Folded against its roof was a telescoping lift, used for reaching the upper levels of the tallest target shelves. Pope and I rode it up to the head waters of the half-molten waterfall. Here, the gases whined and whistled as they squeezed through the tiny orifice.

Pope heated the area with her microwave torch. I wedged an extensible forge into the softened wound and applied pressure.

The metal resisted. I put my shoulder into it, and the hole tore wide open. Our lift kicked away to the right. Pope swore and hung on. I fell, hit the torrent right at its crest.

The surface was covered over with metal garbage. It was smooth and hard beneath. I had nothing to hold onto. Below me waited a golden-hot pool of metal. I clawed for a finger-hold, latched onto something firm. Debris skittered and kicked over me like a wave, but I clung to my handhold till I could lever myself up onto the track.

It was only as I caught my breath before the freshly opened tunnel that I realized what had lent me purchase.

A gloved hand rose out of the welt of metal, as if reaching for a lifeline.

My fellows were silent. I heard someone sob. I thought it was Nuñez, but she was directly behind me, wide-eyed with amazement.

Who was the mechanic enveloped in the metal tomb? I will never know. The crew gathered round to touch the hand, to hold it before moving on.

The train was useless, of course; the track ended here. We piled our gear into the mule's insulated storage bay. We followed behind as it picked its slow path out of the undervane.

I found myself on the shore of a metallic sea. I confess to you, my friend, my emotions overcame me as I took in the new world your treasure had wrought. Where were the screen control towers that reared up around us like a garden of roses? Where were the centrifuge stations, three stories tall and squat as Sultans? Or the hectares of target shelves that rolled out to the edge of the vane? Or the intricate rail lines that tended them?

Before us lay a ghostly beach town of outbuildings, target shelves, and wrecked coolant pipe, all twisted and broken open to the sky. I could pick out individual structures with a moment's concentration. Some of them still had paint on their walls.

Through the gaping doors and windows of a gutted isotope vault, I could see bits of stuff bobbing in the fused metal troughs and waves. Beyond that, the heat had been too intense to leave any trace of history. The topology smoothed into gently rising swells.

The very back of the vane disappeared in a furious glare. Your financial instrument converted everything it touched—ship's decking and incoming nuclei alike—into a stream of X-rays that swept the sky before us.

We would have died but for the polarizing screens. Mutated as they were, the polarizing screens held focus on the burning shelf at the back of the vane. They scoured the bulk of the heat into space.

Far overhead, the corona of your beast burned at 10 million Kelvins. Observatories around the Orion Nebula thought us a new stellar X-ray source. Did you know?

We huddled in shadow of the vault, with our radiators fully unfurled, like butterflies cowering before a typhoon. I poked a hand-held camera through a sagging tear in the wall and sent pictures back to the nuclear chemistry committee.

Some on the committee thought we were saved. A shower of undifferentiated particles would poison the reactions going on before us. Your treasure would gutter out like a candle in a stream of piss.

The captain himself pointed to the star chart over his desk. The *Hierophant* ploughed through the deepest portion of the Scatterhead Nebula. Clouds of ionized tungsten stretched before us all the way to the Hercules Vent. They would gorge the monster till it erupted into some new state.

"We have to know what's out there," the captain said. "Some of us think we've created some sort of exotic vacuum state. We can't tell; at least two of the polarizing screens are intersecting the deck, carrying tell-tale radiation away into space. We need a radio assay from beyond that curtain of plasma."

"We are already too close to the inferno," I said. "Any closer, some of us will die."

Captain was a decent and humble man. He knew very well what he asked of us. He was silent for a moment, and I could almost hear his mind racing for some way out of this terrible command.

"We have to know what's out there," he repeated. "Or all of us will die."

Lend your best attention, my friend; this is how men and women face desperate fate.

There was no drawing of lots, no heroic pronouncements, no brave jokes. Mister Robinson handed the sensor spike to his man Pablo Sanoro. I pointed at a spot overlooking the edge of the pit.

No one offered to take young Pablo's spot. Death in this place is not so easily eluded that a courageous gesture will save one or doom another.

Perhaps the young one, Nuñez—perhaps she was shocked by this. Sanoro gave her a glance as he stepped out into the light. She raised her gloved hand to him but said nothing. There was no time for fond wishes of luck.

Sanoro shouldered his way forward to an outcropping of metal. He paused a moment to gauge his chances and then he staggered on till he disappeared into the light.

An interval of silence. The remote viewer in my hand blazed with sudden light. We gathered around as it showed us the face that leered from behind its veil of plasma. Nuñez called out to Sanoro to hurry back. Before he could answer, a perturbation among the screens raised a tsunami wave of light high over our heads. A dozen detectors crackled inside my helmet and then subsided. I heard something very faint and far away—a cry of agony?

We, all of us, called out for Sanoro. Rosalie Nuñez called his name. Even you, compañero, would weep to hear her voice. And I know you for the hard man you are. Sanoro never answered. Perhaps the radio interference was too dense. Perhaps he turned off his radio so we would not hear him as he died.

Even now, my thoughts turn to young Nuñez. We might have eased her broken heart, but time was hard upon us. On a dozen tiny screens leered the monster that took Sanoro's life.

No, no—you must not turn aside now, my friend. This is the sight you paid to see. This is the source of all that had happened. The molten metal that poured through the undervane flowed from here. The circles of destruction that engulfed the starboard vane radiated from this point.

On collimated radar it was a chimera. It roiled and turned about itself like a snake on a hot spit. Infrared showed scabs of magnetic convection crusted over wounds that bled light. All very pretty, but none of it described the engine that drove this conflagration.

We had one last thing to try. Almost as an afterthought, Sanoro had left a gravitational wave interferometer at the brink of the inferno—bricks of purest rubidium, tautly held in a wire harness. It was telling us something even as we dialed it in, but gravitation is a hard thing to gauge on a ship like the *Hierophant*.

At first, the oscillating line was wildly erratic. As we filtered out the effects of the ship's velocity, the inertial sink, the polarizing screens, the oscilloscope settled into a metronomic pattern, at once familiar and dreadful.

The thing radiated gravitational waves.

We were all of us silent a long moment. I think we all knew what we saw, but no one wanted to say the words.

Of course, *you* know what we saw, don't you. Here is your treasure, compañero. Here is the pearl beyond price.

Vacuum^3. Pterachnium.

—*The Blue Angel.*

Did you know what you were building when you perfected your scheme? Did you fathom the fundamental forces you brought to bear? Indeed, did you think of anything beyond this little moon? These sun-dappled orchards? Those fearsome paladins who guard your sleep?

Pterachnium is not a baryon emitter, like the fissionable actinides. It does not betray itself in high energy photons, as do the other metallic plasmas. Pterachnium nuclei have only one use to men like you—they are the vessels of choice for binding exotic vacuum states.

I speak of energies at which the quantum vacuum itself trembles on the verge of fluctuation. In the twentieth century, such a fluctuation was credited with the creation of the universe. Cosmologists presumed another fluctuation, if it ever really happened, would sweep across the heavens at light speed, plowing all the rules of Nature in its wake.

Those worthies never counted on ingenious fellows like yourself, creating industrial grades of more- and less-perfect quantum vacuum states—bottling-up the lightning of the universe behind an event horizon, like amethyst encrusting the gut of a fire egg.

As I said, mi compañero, you are a clever fellow.

I could tell you the names of ships killed by pterachnium. You would be awe-struck to hear their fates—the *Queen of Wands,* burned by X-rays with all hands in the Venturi Thermals; the *Ace of Cups,* shattered by proton decay; the *Tower,* stripped of its screens at relativistic speeds.

Have you ever seen a ship stripped of its screens at light speed? The leading edge of every span, every deck plate, is pitted and torn as if pecked away by ferocious birds. Sometimes salvage crews find tellolites laying about—tiny deposits of matter left by the energy of particles interacting with the deck (energy, you see, converts to matter, if the exchange is great enough).

At these energies, one's problems are quickly over. Make no mistake, my friend, I speak of a hard end. But at least there are no lingering deaths from burns or radiation sickness. Certainly, Fate can be more unkind.

Exotic vacuum states are infamous for the electrical potential that attends them. Under the deforming compulsion of these fields, a ship's polarizing screens begin to cycle, like wire coiled around a giant dynamo. Charged particles slip between cycling screens and the metal deck. Potential builds to discharge.

If you imagine some display of lightning, your vision is too modest. Scale your thoughts up by a factor of a million—electrical discharge on this scale powers the jet streams of exotic stellar objects.

I boarded a ship once, destroyed by successive discharges of 100 terawatts. I will never forget the smell in the mechanics' armory. It was sweet, you know? Like smoked meat. . . .

No, no, no. Forgive these morbid thoughts, my friend. These things are none of your concern. I merely wish to lend you understanding of our desperate state of mind as we realized the poisoned cargo you had bequeathed us.

Our screens were infected. Our false men were gone. Pope said she could burn the heart from your monster and we gratefully accepted her word. Indeed, I had seen her look into the blue-hot glare off a burning lump of plutonium and split it in two from five hundred meters.

But plutonium was not so fierce as your treasure. We could study plutonium through our leaded face shields. Pope figured to lose her eyesight. I told her she was being ridiculous.

We had an elaborate sensor array in the mule's equipment bay—gamma ray imaging, magnetic resonance, collimated radar. I made sure she had the entire spectrum at her disposal. Nuñez stood in the bay and handed out each piece of equipment. I tested each scope and monitor and staked it into the deck.

But I was the ridiculous one. At some point, Pope would grow frustrated with her prosthetic eyes. She and I both knew this. She would look away into the inferno with her own eyes and press the trigger even as her retinas went forever dark. She did not complain about this. She asked only that she be informed how her aim fared—demanded would be a better word.

"You tell me if I miss," she said. "I'll put one in right next to it. I won't need my eyes for that. If you let me take the gun sights off the target, I won't be able to sight in again. All our deaths will hang on your head."

Such gentle persuasion. How could I refuse?

In the midst of our preparations, something caused me to look up, some change in the light maybe, I don't know.

The burning of the starboard vane had filled the sky above us with a haze of metallic aerosols. I saw them begin to move.

Your monster was flexing its muscle.

I touched helmets with Pope. I pointed out the milky swirls passing across the stars.

She glared at me as if I bothered her, threw off her concentration. "I'll never get this done, you keep interrupting me," she declared. "Maybe I should just hand the gun to you." She turned back to her monitors without waiting for a response.

Snatches of radio conversation were getting through the static. I heard the screen crews fighting with some upper level deformation of the #4 screen, the electron/anti-proton screen.

All the hairs on my body went straight up. The static surge detectors suddenly pegged off the scale. Robinson and Nuñez waved to me from the equipment bay at the back of the mule. It only occurred to me then—of course, the equipment bay was surrounded in conducting metal. It would be completely insulated.

I called to Pope as they dragged me in behind them. She refused even to acknowledge me.

Nuñez was still closing the door as a flash lit up the sky across the entire plain of fused metal. It was an ancient light, a light from the dawn of creation. Through my leaded visor—*through my closed eyelids* — I saw the bones of my hands, clamped across my face.

The door slammed. The deck heaved beneath us. I crashed into the ceiling and then back to the floor, came up tasting blood and swallowing chipped teeth. A hurricane shrieked in my helmet radio, loud enough to split open my head.

My thoughts were on Pope. She was outside the door, just beyond my reach. How had she fared? Had she gotten off her shot?

We stepped outside even while the superheated light receded. The mule was over on its side, and the door was sprung. I had to shove at the door with Nuñez and Mister Robinson to get it open. Pope was gone. I have no idea what happened to her. She was simply gone.

I called out for her, scanned the deck as best I could for some sign of her. None of us ever saw Pope again. However, as I came around the side of the mule, I saw something that will stay with me always.

Rolling out of the shade of a distant cargo bay came the little crew tractor carrying Esteban Contreras' unlucky Hot Shots.

I took it to be some sort of drifting retinal artifact from the burning light. But it was real. It crossed the blasted desert with the leisurely air of a family on beach holiday.

Each person in the crew cabin sat up straight in their seats, utterly unconcerned about the excursion lighting up the sky before us. They rolled right into it, rigid as a six-pack of cerveza.

I called out to them, but of course they were dead—burned to a blackened husk right inside their bright, shiny hot suits. Up in the chief's cabin was Contreras himself, hanging from the window, his hands dragging along the deck as the little train pushed forward into the raging brilliance at the back of the starboard vane.

There was no question we had moments left to us. Already I could see my surge detector flickering again. Your monster had magnetized everything out beyond its mote of liquid metal—the lead shielding as well as the steel in the decking. Its magnetic lair increased even as we hunkered behind our shattered railhead.

Soon it would begin pulling down the polarizing screens. Particles would be unloaded across the ship. They would scatter through the soft parts of the hull and kill everyone standing nearby. Behind the collapsing screens would come the in-falling sky, igniting the fissionable materials on all four vanes.

Mister Robinson and I had no use for panic. Huddled together against the roar of radio interference, we considered our options as if we were discussing the price of 3:00 perbladium on the futures floor at Santa Buenaventura.

Normal circumstances, we would try to heat the site somehow, and cause it to melt in with the metal around it. Even if it remained in a critical configuration, it might be contaminated by melted steel from the deck, or lead, or boron from the surrounding shielding to poison the reaction chain.

That seemed a dubious proposal in this case. Any lump of matter that held Vacuum^3 in its heart already knew more about heat than anything we could teach it.

We paused in our discussion as a cluster of tellolites levitated half a meter over the deck, only to land a few centimeters from the tip of my boot. Mister Robinson's eyes rose from the bit of mongrel matter at our feet to the inferno before us.

"We seem to be in the presence of primordial symmetry," he said.

This is what reached out to the little pebbles on the deck around us, what had crushed a tractor into a coolant pipe on the far side of the Blue Highway—the four fundamental forces of nature had rediscovered that symmetry they lost in the first billion-billion-billionth of a second after creation.

"This, from Vacuum^3?"

"Or Vacuum^4. We're in no position for a precise assay."

It was hard not to be over-awed by the majesty of your art. And yet, what did we cower before, after all? A bit of vacuum! The apotheosis of nothingness. Perhaps we wasted our time attacking the pterachnium; the vacuum state bound within might be manipulated more easily.

I put it to Mister Robinson: "These vacuum states run in chains of progression, just like the decay chain of any unstable nucleotide. A couple of steps up from Vacuum^3 is a stable plateau not dissimilar to the quantum vacuum state we call home."

I remember the way he nodded to himself; Mister Robinson was not hurried by desperation or despair.

"If we could define the right particles with our screens, we could push our load of Vacuum^3 up to that plateau."

"Right this second, you know what the temperatures are like beyond those polarizing screens? What kind of particles are going to get through that?"

"Dark matter," I said. "Weakly interacting super-luminals. They have no electric charge to become entangled in the firestorm. They touch this universe with nothing but the slender fingers of gravity, and nothing but dense matter draws them in. Perhaps they will be sufficient to our needs."

Mister Robinson considered the proposal for a long moment. "We've got a problem," he said. "No matter what happens to the pterachnium, we'll be sitting out here when the ship goes super-luminal. The hull will be protected, but out here, we will be exposed to whatever comes down. It hardly matters that these particles are 'weakly interacting,' anything will kill you if you get hit by enough of them."

Mister Robinson began reminiscing about a man he had known in the French Violet, killed by neutrinos—*neutrinos* of all things. He saw the youngster watching us all wide-eyed. He stopped himself.

I started to suggest we might yet escape. Mister Robinson indicated the impassable blastscape behind us with a single look. "This ship has maybe two minutes to live? What do you think, Mister Seguro? Two minutes before the screens are all bound in a huge magnetic source and start cycling? Where are we going to go in the next two minutes?"

I said, "I'm certainly open to suggestions, Mister Robinson." He laughed. Mister Robinson and I went back a ways. Neither of us had any particular trouble doing what was necessary to save the ship.

But the youngster, she troubled us some. This was her training flight. This should have been safe and easy. We would never have brought along some young niña on anything more dangerous than nice, easy Morghium 414.

I asked her if she understood what we were discussing. She said she did. I asked her if she agreed with our assessment.

She said she did. I detected a softness to her voice. She might have been holding back her emotions. Yet she never cried for any sort of consideration for her youth or her status. She understood that we were all about to die, and that only the ship mattered now.

I called back to Frances Cruz and made our proposal.

Frances would not hear of it. She found a thousand reasons to doubt my solution. Yet she could find nothing better. I did not have the time to argue, but for her I made the time. It wasn't easy. How do you explain a decision like this to a special friend and confidant?

I gave myself thirty seconds, and then, when she still could not understand, I gave myself thirty seconds more. I needed to speak to Captain Diaz about our plan, but I couldn't leave Frances till she understood that the sweetness of my life had been hers, and the only horror I felt at leaving was bound up with her as well.

Captain Diaz cut into our conversation to hear out our proposal. Captain was a decent man, but he could count—three lives against twenty-seven. He told us they would need a gravitational wave detector as near the pterachnium as we could get. Sanoro's detector had gone dark moments after it had showed us the face of your creature. We had to replace it, so that the nuclear chemistry committee would know how our mission fared. When he went to initiate the screen dump, Frances did not return to the line.

I turned to Nuñez and Robinson. "I set the wave detector myself," I told them.

Mister Robinson made a gesture of indifference. "We have no place to go," he said. "We might as well come with you."

"We come along," Nuñez said in a husky voice. "You falter, we're there." She looked ready to make a fight of it if I ordered her back; Sanoro's death weighed heavy on her.

I had my eye on a spot twenty meters ahead of us. A stub of metal reared up from the smooth-blasted decking. What had been there before your undertaking? I recalled a nuclear furnace near that point. Two stories tall it had been. The tiny mesa in its place rose perhaps a meter tall now.

"We reach that hump in the deck and plant the detector on its further side." I pointed.

Beyond that little rise lay a final circle of hell, smooth as the surface of an egg. Liquefied steel, I realized, boiling away to gas at its center. Your treasure had corrupted all the metal across the back of the molten mirror. Beneath the shade of my palm, it looked like the gilt of a Rococo picture frame.

I moved forward till the heat in my suit was unbearable. I could hardly swallow for the metallic taste of hard radiation in my mouth. Probing tendrils of lightning thick as rope played over our suits and slammed the deck at our feet. The heat burned through the soles of our boots till I could barely walk.

I planted the spike in the metal decking at the point I could go no further.

I felt the deck tremble beneath me as the ship accelerated. I remember bracing myself for the gauntlet of particles awaiting me on the far side of the light barrier—*Would it burn me? Would I have time to feel anything?*

But something was wrong. Frances was in my headset, saying something about losing the signal. I was delirious by then. Her words barely made sense.

She was telling me the wave detector that we had just put out had gone silent, even as the energy output had grown more intense. She was asking if I could still see it above the pterachnium site. She thought it had been destroyed.

That wasn't why she had lost the signal anyway, was it, my friend? Your jewel was gathering itself up, as a giant coastal wave will gather all the water off a beach before it rolls in.

Your creature was coming to fruition at last.

Of course, I was past caring by this time. Zone angels appeared and evaporated before my eyes, as vivid as childhood memories. I doubt I was even conscious.

In my blindness, I stumbled and crashed to the deck. A dire circumstance; the deck glowed red hot. The flesh of my shoulder burned from the heat of it. Indeed, this is where my shoulders and back acquired those handsome keloids you have been admiring so surreptitiously.

I was a breath away from unconsciousness, and that would have meant my death. Seeking relief, I took a sip from my water hose. Nothing came out but superheated air. The water had gone to steam and been recycled into a safety reservoir till it could recondense. Of course, I would be long dead by then.

In the middle of this horror came a sudden vision of preternatural quiet. I saw the village square in Santa Susana de la Reina—the wind funnels creaking in the cupola of the old mission, the black moss and the purple, the smell of the constant rain.

—Rain!

How vivid the memory of rain came to me in that moment. In my mouth I held the sweet smell of the wet timbers beneath Boregos Bridge. I could see the mirrored pools filling the broken streets, their surfaces cut by black lizards.

I saw rain running in sheets beyond a limp curtain. I saw a bare shoulder, silhouetted against the milky light. A friend in the street below called up to us to unlock the door and let him in, while we lay in the dark and laughed at him and everyone else in the world who knew not what we knew in that moment.

I heard the shouting again, but it wasn't Esteban Contreras calling up to Frances and me from the street. It was Mister Robinson. He was calling to me from a ripple of metal just a few meters to port. He might have been on the other side of the French Violet for the gulf of pain and light between us.

Nuñez was stranded behind a small rise just beyond him. She was waving to us, making some gesture. I could not make it out. A clearing of silence breached the static roar just long enough that I could catch her words.

"Here it comes," she cried. Somehow, Nuñez had heard the countdown to light speed on her suit radio: The sky was coming in.

I looked around for some bit of cover to hide myself. Something split the glare just off to my right. I had barely noticed it while planting the gravity wave detector; it had been still as any other bit of metal on that blasted expanse. But as I looked closer, I realized the shadow was articulated with radiator fins and circulating packs.

I shaded my eyes with my palm and peered into the glare that beat up from the metal decking. Here was Pablo Sanoro, frozen in an attitude of intent concentration—staring at the gravity wave detector he had worked at even as he burned to death.

I pulled him down over me just as the stars smeared into rainbows. The deck burned my back. The incoming particles burned my fingers as they gripped around Sanoro's shoulders.

I held tight. I spent a micro epoch in that way—my back blistering against the super heated deck, and Pablo Sanoro just inches from my leaded visor, grinning the wizened, squinting smile of a face with flesh and muscle drawn taught.

I heard Nuñez scream. Pinned under Sanoro's hot suit, I raised my head just enough to see your treasure plunge through a hundred ton metal deck as if it were soft taffy.

A crevasse spread out from the back of the vane. It etched a jagged line right out to us. Nuñez disappeared down the hole as it spread through the deck beneath her feet.

Robinson grasped for her as she slipped out of sight. In that moment, your creature reached up through the metal decking and took him in a 130 Tesla magnetic field. I saw Robinson twist and heave like a rag doll as the flesh peeled from his bones.

A cloud of steam enveloped him from below somewhere below and he was gone. I remember staring in amazement as it rose into the sky. Where had that come from?

I didn't realize till much later, but your monster had crashed through three floors below the main deck, severing a dozen plumbing mains along the way.

This is what killed so many people inside the hull—not fire, but water. The water in all the lines flashed to steam and exploded throughout the interior of the ship.

After some time I became lucid. I found myself lying along the palisade of a canyon, cut to the depths of the starboard vane.

All of my mates were dead. All of our equipment sucked down into the hole your monster had made for itself.

It is ironic, but this saved me from dying. With your pterachnium sunk away out of sight, the heat and magnetism refocused on some point in the undervane.

I thought I might get help from one of the other vane crews. I went down to the mechanics' armory to see about some assistance. But the mechanics' armory had been closest to the back of the vane as your treasure came into its own. My compañeros had been among the first inside the hull to die.

The ship above the armory was utterly silent. It was a catalog of unpleasant endings. People in airtight cabins suffocated or burned. People closer to fissures in the hulls, destroyed by explosive decompression.

I found Frances on the floor leading out of the forward head. Blood pooled out of her ears. I tell myself she was killed instantly. Who knows? Perhaps she was.

No, please. Allow me to tell the story; just looking at her, I could re-enact the moment of her death. Indeed, it is not without its amusing side.

You see, there is a standing rule never to go to the toilet during a hot load. I mean, these things have happened before. These ships are compact, no matter how large they appear, and the plumbing lines always end up going throughout the ship, and a few people every year end up being killed this way.

So Frances knew the risks of going to the bathroom when she did. But the emergency had gone on for several hours now, and her need had taken on an urgency of its own.

Had she been truly born of wealth she could have squatted in the corner like a house cat. But no, she was born to the merchant class, and such compromise with her dignity left her too little to hold on to. The steam explosion blew out the wall behind her head.

Pardon, my friend. I am not unaware how this must seem to a man of refinement like yourself. Yet, this has an air of the hilarious: A princess dies while sitting on the toilet—a good joke from God, yes? An amusing trick.

—Don't touch me.

And do not tell me again how sorry you are. Or how necessary it was. Or how I would have done the same in your position. . . .

Excuse me, please. No, no— It is I who must apologize. You have been more than patient. The story reaches denouement.

I found myself carrying Frances around in my arms. I can't tell you where we were going. All the officers' quarters were blown open to space. I just could never find a place to set her down. So I carried her.

Eventually, I found myself up in the Heidelburgh Tun, where the officers had made their last stand.

Imagine my surprise to find someone alive up here. More surprising still to find him walking around in a hot suit from the mechanics' armory. This would be Galvan, the navigator.

I said, "That might be a tight fit in an escape pod."

He was startled at the sound of my voice. He spun around, looking for me. Of course, I was a voice in his radio—I might have been anywhere. Even so, he hid something behind his back, like a child with an embarrassing secret.

"Seguro," he said. And then, "Joaquin. You survived." He did not sound overjoyed to see me.

I asked him what he had in his hand. He actually fought me as I reached around to take it from him.

What do you suppose it was, this thing that would make a timid little man punch at me and dig at my air hose to kill me?

You know what it was. It was a clock, wasn't it. But a very special clock. No doubt, you see them all the time. They are common on the floor of the Bright Matter Exchange. Familiar to shipping agents and futures traders.

We call them "true clocks." They are used to track the true passage of time back at a ship's home port.

To the uninitiated, this may seem a small matter. You, of course, know better. Our ship plies the clouds of Orion at speeds approaching light. A dozen times during the course of a run, we accelerate, we brake. Shipboard time changes with each fluctuation. We cross over the light barrier on our way to and from work. When we do, time is calculated in imaginary numbers. A clock set to follow such distortions is not the sort of thing a man on a navigator's salary would own.

Galvan tried to tell me this was a part of his navigator's kit. Indeed, the navigator's loft is equipped to track the constant passage of time, but only relative to our own course. The clock in Galvan's hand was synchronized to the time on the eastern shore of a little island on a deserted moon in the San Marcos star system.

This moon, in fact. This very moon. What do you suppose, my friend?

Galvan dissembled as I asked him his purpose up here. In fact, he had been completing a course correction. He claimed he was moving us out of shipping lanes. But we were headed for this star up in the French Violet, this Michele D'avinet. He had no ready explanation why.

I put it to him that we were partners in this matter—each had something the other wanted. Galvan had the name of the monster that destroyed my ship. I had Galvan's air hose, pinched between my fingers.

In that way we bartered for the next hour: One answer, one gulp of air.

I learned the name of Beltran Seynoso, weapons designer to half the armies, militias, and mercenary groups in the French Violet. He told me of the star, Michele D'avinet. He was not specific as to your loyalties; I suspect he did not know them himself. But he described your plan in some detail.

He told me about your audacious scheme to poison the sun these people lived under and warm themselves against. A bold stroke, Sir! Set my ship on course for this star, D'avinet, then consume it into a singularity on the way. What would happen if a singularity the size of my old ship had crashed into a star like Michele D'avinet? Billions of people would die terribly. It would be a tragedy of majestic proportions.

Truly, you are a man of vision.

Galvan became frantic toward the end. He gave minute details of your operation. He told me everything about you that he could think of. He answered questions I hadn't thought to ask. I suspect he padded what he knew with outright speculations.

You mustn't blame him for this; he believed his life lasted as long as our conversation. Indeed, he bought each breath with another bit of truth. And when he ran out of truth . . .

My actions shock you. Forgive me; I should play more the hero in my own drama. But she is gone, you see? And I am left with only one role that matters. I am your delivery man.

I see that your scheme was sound in its fundamentals, but there was a complication: Vacuum^3 collapses into a singularity in 16 nanoseconds. That would never do. Galvan needed time to set the ship's course. As he was a navigator of mediocre talents, course corrections would be required on the way. And you had to leave the illusion that he would escape.

So you set the thing to dissipate most of its energy in gravitational waves. No matter. The density would be sufficient when the time came. Small singularities would form, consume all the matter around them, begin to coalesce.

I am in no position to mentor a man of your estimable talents. But perhaps one or two suggestions for next time? There is a phase transition in the production of pterachnium. Below its critical mass, pterachnium, at least in the form you created, becomes quiet and morose. It can be captured. The careful man can manipulate it into a more pliant form.

I myself journeyed down into the deep fissure that cut through the heart of the starboard vane. It was cold when I arrived. The radiations had banked, the ferocious gravities and magnetic fluctuations had subsided. The liquefied metals that had chased us through the undervane had now congealed into curtains, flood plains, weird minarets.

There, I found your precious, bound up in clusters of tellolite nodules at the bottom of the chasm. Though my petty sophistries had failed to save the ship, they had managed to convert your Vacuum^3 into a pliant state, a form that allows it to be carried without collapsing spontaneously into singularity.

Yes, my friend. Your treasure lives. I have even returned it to its original liquid suspension. This, after all, is the way things are done in the production of commercial isotopes since the days of the great nuclear reactors.

Atoms of target material are held in liquid suspension to allow their thorough saturation by incoming particles.

It is quiet now. It exists in two sub-critical drams, but when poured together, they undergo a phase transition into that tool of petty vengeance you procured at such cost.

Don't worry, they're close to hand.

Are you sure you won't have some of this very fine tea? You won't mind if I pour myself a little topper then, will you?

I noticed your tea pots as soon as I entered the kitchen. Yes, they definitely attracted my interest. You make tea in the Chinese manner—one pot to boil the water, one pot to brew the tea. Excellent. Exactly right. None of this tea bag chic for you, my friend.

Do the two pots have a history? You are a tea man. You know that a good tea pot is like a good wallet, or a good pair of boots. It ages. It carries a certain history about with it.

My own set is humble by comparison. Cheap porcelain, brightly painted with scenes from a port town on the lee side of Spanish Space. I would have replaced it long ago, except it was a gift, you see. From someone whose tastes ran to the simple and sweet.

No matter. Life is the sum of simple delights—a tawdry souvenir from Puerta Estrella. A smile reflected in dark eyes. A cup of tea with a newfound friend. One cannot shun such bagatelles.

Not when death is sixteen nanoseconds away. ○

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Nelson Bond

PROOF OF THE PUDDING

Nelson Bond is the second author in this issue born in 1908. His first science fiction sale went to *Astounding* in 1937. The author's short story collections include *The 31st of February* (1949), *No time Like the Future* (1954), and *Nightmares and Daydreams* (1968). His only novel in book form, *Exiles of Time*, was published in 1949. In 1998, he was made Author Emeritus by the Science Fiction Writers of America. Mr. Bond has been published extensively in magazines like *Scribners, Blue Book, Amazing, Weird Tales,* and *Fantastic Adventures.* Although it's taken sixty-two years, we are delighted that he finally has a story for us.

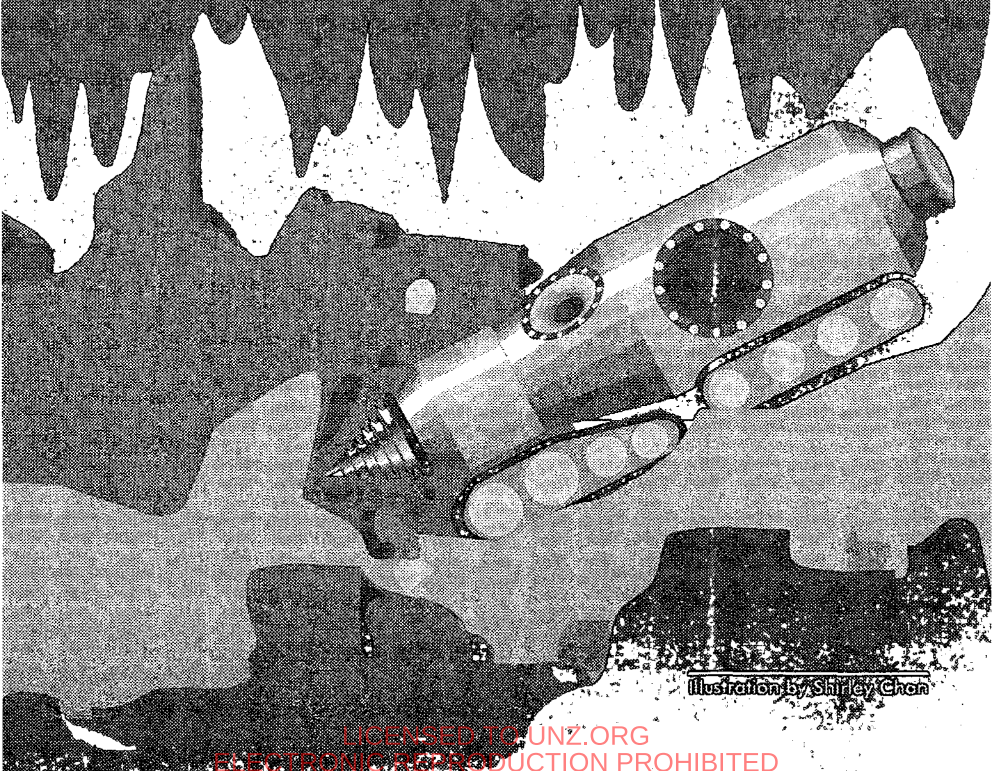


Illustration by Shirley Chan

George Townsend made a fortune, then went mad. Of course that term was not applied in his case. Only the poor are crazy. Persons of moderate means are mentally disturbed, while those of wealth are merely eccentric.

Nevertheless, George Townsend was insane. And the nature of his madness was that he believed the earth to be a hollow sphere. He claimed we live not *on* its surface but *within* it. At the drop of a hat (or without it) Townsend would defend his concept valiantly against all comers, meeting their arguments with rebuttals to him more reasonable than the evidence they offered.

"The sun," said adherents to orthodox science, "the moon, the planets, the distant stars. Aren't these proof that we look up and out to boundless space?"

"By no means," answered Townsend. "The bubble in which we live is quite large enough to contain the pinpoints that light our sky. Their alleged size and their distance is mere illusion. Astronomers measure with faulty instruments, that is all."

"And gravitation?" they asked him.

"Newton's error," said Townsend. "The force that binds us to earth is clearly centrifugal."

"But if you are right," they demanded, "what lies outside this hollow sphere?"

"That I do not know," conceded Townsend. "But I intend to find out. Talk is cheap, and empty barrels make the most noise. But actions speak louder than words. I will go out and see."

Thus, in a salvo of the timeworn clichés to which he was addicted, Townsend silenced his opponents and announced his plan. Townsend freely admitted his concept was not novel with himself; and that others had earlier advanced the same theory. But Townsend differed from his predecessors in that he was a multi-millionaire. And as he was fond of saying, "Money makes the mare go." So he summoned engineers and told them what he wanted.

"I want you to build me a vehicle," he said. "A powerful machine that can drill completely through Earth's eggshell crust."

The engineers shook their heads. "We can create such a machine," they told him, "but it cannot do what you propose. Earth's heat increases as you travel toward its core. At a depth of ten miles you will die of suffocation. At forty the borer will dissolve in a sea of molten rock."

"Build the machine," said Townsend.

"Folly!" they warned him.

"Build the machine," said Townsend, "and call it Townsend's Folly, if you wish. Men may laugh, but I will go to Earth's outer surface. When I return I will laugh. And he who laughs last, laughs best."

They built the burrower. They did not call it Townsend's Folly, but the Earthworm. It was an ingenious vehicle, vermicular in form and operation. Massive atomic drills, like chomping jaws, gnawed a pathway before it, passed the detritus back through a cyclotron gizzard that digested its mineral diet and excreted its residue in the form of powdery ash, leaving in its wake a tunnel as smooth as if bored by an auger. And on a certain morning in mid-March, Townsend posed for news cameramen beside his metal worm.

"Many of you," he said, "have urged me to delay; to test; to ascertain the efficiency of this vehicle. But he who hesitates is lost, and there is no time like the present. I will go now, and when I return you will know the true nature of the world in which we dwell. And so you may share my great adventure, I will keep in touch with you by television. Thus you will actually *see* the outer world. And seeing—" added Townsend "—is believing."

Then he climbed into the Earthworm. Gears meshed, the giant jaws gnawed sandy soil, and he was gone.

At a depth (or height) of five miles, Townsend verified one prediction of the engineers. "It *is* hot here," he acknowledged. "About 400 degrees Fahrenheit. But the refrigerating unit is efficient, and I am comfortable."

At ten miles he reported, "The Earthworm is now boring through a stratum of solid ores. There is enough raw mineral here at this level to maintain mankind's industries for countless centuries."

At intervals of twenty miles and thirty his messages were in the same vein. Measurements of heat, pressure and composition in every way supported conventional theory. When at thirty-five miles his report was delayed, apprehension grew. Hasty pleas were transmitted.

"Come back, Townsend," begged his friends. "You have proved man can plumb the depths of Earth far deeper than was formerly believed. You have demonstrated the practicability of a new deep-drilling instrument. You have opened the way to undreamed resources, fabulous wealth. Come back and accept the plaudits of a grateful world."

"Not so," responded Townsend stubbornly. "I go on. Within the past half hour the temperature has dropped three hundred degrees. The matter about me now is less dense, more soil-like. According to my reckoning I am approaching the true surface of the earth. I will switch on the camera so you may see."

The screen, which had been blank, began to glow with flecks of mottled light. Viewers saw a tumbled sifting effect, as if great clots of soil were being churned from the mouth of a tunnel boring upward from great depths. At first there was more dark than light, then rapidly more light than dark, as the nose of Townsend's burrower emerged from Earth's hollow center to its outer shell.

Townsend rotated his camera. As its lens panned the horizon astonished viewers gazed upon a world of awesome beauty. A world of skies ablaze with countless suns; a world of vegetation wild and strange, amongst the towering fronds of which the Earthworm was no mighty mechanism but a tiny, wriggling mote.

Townsend's voice reached his listeners stridently, in triumph.

"I have succeeded!" proclaimed Townsend proudly. "Here is the true, the undreamed outer Earth. And I am the first to reach its surface.

"Proving," he gloated, "that where there's a will there's a way. And that fortune favors the brave—"

Abruptly the sun-strewn sky was overshadowed. The watchers briefly glimpsed the swooping dive of a span of monstrous wings, saw the swift gaping of a tremendous beak that yawned to swallow everything . . . camera and Earthworm and Townsend . . . all in one gulp.

Then darkness fell.

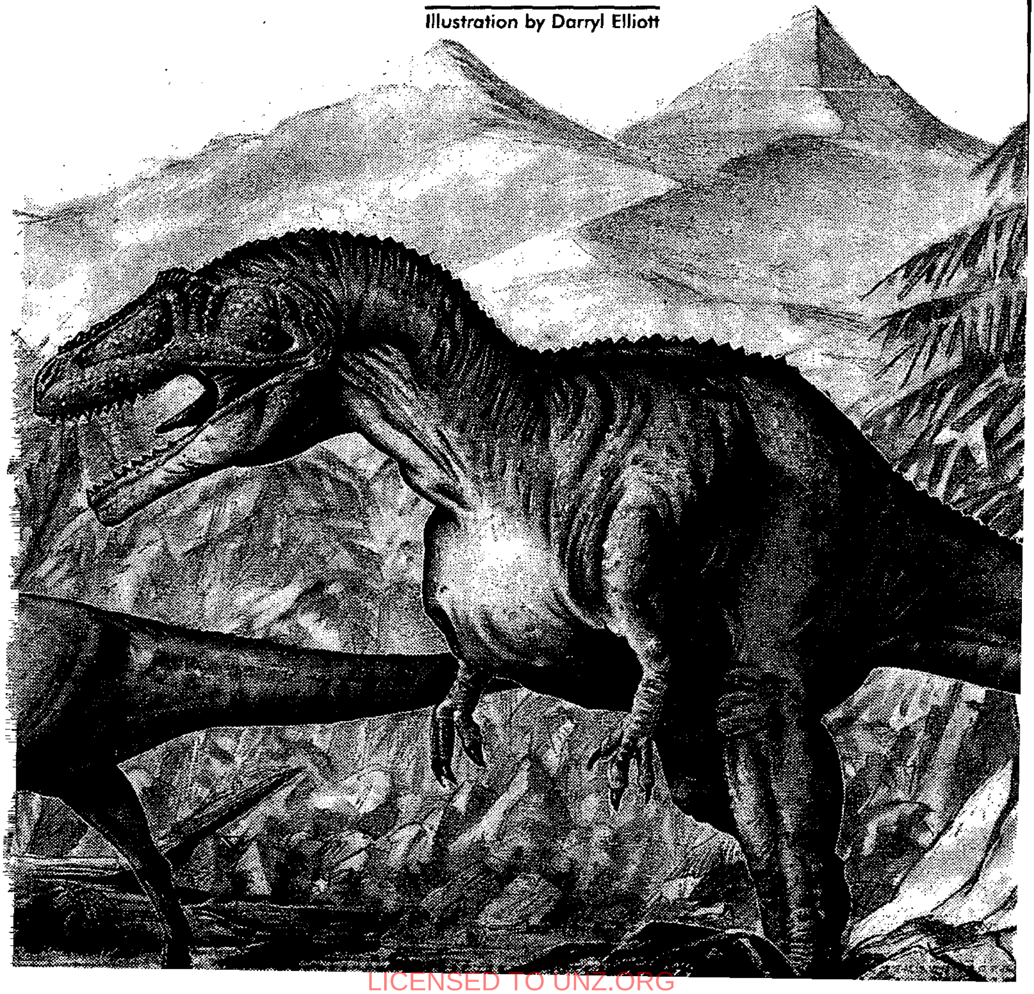
George Townsend had proven his final adage: that the early bird catches the worm. O

Michael Swanwick

RIDING THE GIGANOTOSAUR

Michael Swanwick's astounding new distinction is that he is the first author with three short stories competing against each other on the Hugo ballot. All three tales, "The Very Pulse of the Machine" (February 1998), "Wild Minds" (May 1998), and "Radiant Doors" (September 1998), were first published in *Asimov's*. The latter tale was also the winner of our own Readers' Award poll.

Illustration by Darryl Elliott



"How does it feel?"

"It feels *great!*"

The physical therapist lifted one of George Weskowski's arms and flexed it, to check its range of motion. It took all of her strength to do so, even though George wasn't resisting. She frowned. "No need to roar," she chided.

"Sorry."

"There's a transmitter chip connected to your speech centers. Just subvocalize, and I can pick up what you're saying on this radio. Tell me how your head feels."

He considered. "Fine. Just fine."

"No aches, itches, irritation around the sutures?"

"No."

"Dizziness, nausea, hallucinations, phantom sounds or smells, mood swings, loss of appetite?"

"I could eat a horse!"

The therapist held up a mirror. "Now look at yourself."

His skin was green, mottled with yellow, and covered with pebbly scales. His eyes were small, beady, homicidal. His arms, massive compared to what he had once possessed but puny compared to the rest of his new body, ended in three scimitar-taloned fingers. His legs were enormous. So was his tail. Opening his mouth revealed a murderous array of razor-sharp teeth.

"Oh yes," he cried rapturously. "Yes, oh my goodness, yes, absolutely, yes, yes!"

"You like it?"

"It's everything I ever dreamed of being."

"The appearance doesn't bother you?"

"I look terrific!"

He did, too. *Giganotosaurus* was the biggest, baddest predator ever to walk the Earth—larger, heavier, and more fearsome even than the old record-holder, *Tyrannosaurus rex*. "The king is dead," George whispered to himself. "Long live the king."

"What was that?"

"I said I'm eager to begin therapy, Doctor Alvarez."

"Good. Then let's try standing up."

This, however, was nowhere near so satisfactory. George lurched eagerly to his knees and promptly overbalanced. He leaned against the side of the barn, making the wood creak, to ease his descent to the straw-covered ground. "Damn!"

"Careful—you weigh over eight tons now. And your leg bones are hollow—like a bird's. You could easily break one doing that."

"I'll remember."

"Good. Now your problem is that you're *pushing* it. It's only your forebrain we've grafted atop the existing brain, remember, and it isn't familiar with the body. However, the hindbrain knows what to do. All the motor skills are already fully functional. Don't intellectualize. Just picture what you want. The original brain has no defenses against you; it accepts your thoughts as its own. What you have to do is learn to *ride* it."

"I'll try," he said humbly.

"Excellent. We'll begin by . . ."

* * *

Six hours later, George was walking easily around and around the corral. He had even essayed a few brief sprints, with varied results. As he walked, he breathed deeply of the Cretaceous air, savoring the intoxicating mix of greenery and resins, the dark, heady undersmell of decay.

Old Patagonia Station was located on a floodplain, with a fern prairie to one side, and a forest of towering conifers to the other. There was a stream nearby—he could smell it—and the glint of a lake far off in the distance. It was a fresh, wondrous, unexplored world, and he was anxious to be off and into it.

"When can I begin field work?" he asked.

Doctor Alvarez pursed her lips. "You're still recovering from the surgery. We won't be making that decision for a few weeks."

"But . . ." He waved a futile little paw outward, toward the lands that stretched to a misty blue horizon and beyond, unspoiled, virginal, his for the taking. He'd have to travel clear around the world to encounter a man-made structure. All the way back to the time station and its out-buildings behind him—and once they were gone, there wouldn't be anything more like them for another ninety million years. "I thought I could get in some hunting before nightfall."

"That reminds me." The therapist went back into the barn and returned, dragging a heavy sack behind her. With a grunt, she hoisted it up and emptied it into a trough.

"What's that?"

"A specially formulated blend of protein, roughage, and vitamins. The wranglers call it dino chow." She paused. "That's our little joke."

"You expect me to eat *kibble?*" he asked, horrified.

The prairie to one side of Old Patagonia Station had been browsed clear by the migratory herds of titanosaurs, rebbachisaurs, and andesaurs that dominated the local ecology. The forest, though, with its close-thronged trees, presented the colossal herbivores with an impenetrable barrier. They could feed on the leaves at its border, but nothing more. The interior was forbidden them.

But not George.

Large as he was, he was slim enough to slip between the trees—just.

He ran, leaped over the fence with a bound, and was gone into the woods. It was a beautiful, sunshiny day, and his greenish-yellow skin blended with the foliage perfectly.

That evening he made his first kill.

He experienced his new life in three distinct phases. There was the initial heady rush of freedom, when he ran as far and fast as his powerful new body would take him, wild with animal joy. Then he settled down into a happy daze. No more bosses! No more networking, no more memos, no more meetings! He'd never see the inside of an office again, sweat out another cold sell, face down another IRS audit. He sauntered along aimlessly, occasionally letting out a roar, just to watch the bright flocks of birds with taloned wings take flight in fear. This phase lasted him about an hour.

Then his stomach rumbled, and suddenly he discovered what a frustrating time and place the Patagonian Cretaceous could be.

The problem was that he hadn't the slightest idea of how to hunt, and he was too impatient to simply sit back and let the giganotosaur's old brain take over.

He tried. Twice he saw herbivores in the distance, and his body trembled with blood-lust and began striding toward them. But then—he couldn't help it—he'd bellowed with hunger and bravado, and charged. Each time, the creatures spooked and ran, too fast for him to catch up with them. Those suckers could move! They ran a lot faster than anything that size had any right to run.

He, in turn, was a sprinter—capable of the short, shocking dash that could do the job *if* he were close enough to overtake his target in the first mad rush of his attack. Before the creature could get its unwieldy bulk moving. Then, briefly, he was the fastest animal in existence. But he could only maintain that insane spurt of speed for a few minutes. More than that, his energy would give out, and his prey would escape every time.

So he realized that he would have to stalk the brutes.

Running lightly along the fringe between forest and prairie, George saw in the distance a number of black specks. As he came closer, the specks resolved themselves into long-necked giants feeding upon the tall trees at the edge of the prairie.

Titanosaurs. They were immense things, averaging some twenty-five to thirty meters in length. It was hard to see how they managed to eat enough to keep such tremendous bodies fed. Even a small one would rot long before George could eat it all.

Slyly, he slipped into the forest.

With a stealthy ease that both pleased and astonished him, he sped quietly between the dark trees. It was a climax forest, so there was plenty of room between the trunks. The ground was covered with a litter of decomposing leaves, which deadened the sound of his footfalls. He was able to get so close to the titanosaurs that he could hear them chomping down on leaves and branches, and smell the stinking mounds of dung they left behind.

Cautiously, he drew closer.

Slanting rays of dusty yellow sunshine pierced the green canopy overhead and descended like beams of grace to its dark floor. Birds with toothed beaks flitted through the beams, like painted angels briefly glimpsed in the glory of early morning. George waited for his eyes to adapt, then crept into the new growth at the verge of the forest. He looked up at the nearest titanosaur. Its neck stretched up into the trees, taller than any giraffe's.

God, he thought. Look at the size of that monster!

For an instant—only an instant—his spirit quailed. Then he gathered all his strength, and, with a scream, ran straight at the nearest giant, intending to leap up at its soft, undefended throat, and tear it open.

But it didn't quite work out that way.

The instant that the titanosaur became aware of him, it shifted its weight onto its hind legs and wheeled about. That slender, endless tail came slashing around like a whip, straight at George.

For an instant, he could not think. His mind went completely blank with astonishment.

That instant was the saving of him.

While George was mentally paralyzed, his giganotosaur reflexes took over, skidding his body to a stop, ducking frantically down, and scrabbling desperately with legs and stubby little arms to get away from the gigantic sauropod.

The tail came crashing down and dealt him a glancing blow. He received the merest fraction of its force, but that was enough. It knocked him over and sent him tumbling back into the small trees and cycads at the verge of the forest. And it *stung*. It stung like blue blazes.

By the time George had gathered himself together and stood again, aching but unbroken, the titanosaur was gone. It had ambled away, further down the forest line, and its fellows with it, to look for some food that wasn't infested with impertinent little predators.

George burned with humiliation.

This wasn't what he'd paid for. This wasn't what he'd spent a lifetime slaving away in the financial markets in order to buy. He'd wanted to be a *carnivore,* goddamnit, a killer in fact as well as in spirit! The ball-busting and competitor-breaking aspects of the business world had their satisfactions. But he'd wanted to experience competition in its purest form, murderous and merciless, as Nature had intended.

It was obvious to him now that no predator, not even the mighty giganotosaur, was meant to prey upon the giant sauropods. They were protected by their size, their bulk, their mass. It had been folly to think he could hunt down and kill a titanosaur.

This was a disappointment, but one he would have to live with. He was just going to have to scale down his expectations a bit. Someday, perhaps, he would know enough to take out one of those big bastards. But in the meantime, he had to get himself fed.

While he was preoccupied with his thoughts, the giganotosaur had gotten itself up and crept back to the verge of the forest. It found a place where it could crouch, hidden by the new growth, and there it waited.

By the time George was able to focus outward again, his body had found what it wanted for supper.

He didn't know what the creature was called. It was small for a dinosaur, about the size of a large boar, and went about on four legs, rooting in the dirt among the ferns and low bushes of the prairie.

George watched it, motionless, from the edge of the forest. His binocular vision was excellent—better than what his human eyes had enjoyed for a decade. His body knew what to do. It quivered with tension, anxious to attack. But he held it back, with forced patience. He wanted his first kill to be a clean one.

The creature moved a little closer to him, a little further away, a little closer again. It was oblivious to his presence.

Finally, he let slip the leash. His body charged forward, almost silently, head low and close to the ground. The creature looked up, saw him, and squealed. But before it could turn and run, he was upon it. His massive jaws closed upon its neck with a snap. Blood spurted, warm and sticky. He shook his head twice, to snap the beast's spine. And it was dead.

He crunched it down to nothing in a matter of minutes.

Afterward, he sought out a stream and drank until his thirst was slaked. The water was warm and brown. It tasted great.

When he'd had his fill, he lay on his stomach in the ferns above the bank. Dragonflies came and hovered in the air before him like small helicopters.

He stared dreamily out into the western sky, where the setting sun was painting the clouds gold and orange and red, and took stock. Since this morning he had experienced pride, anger, gluttony, and—now—sloth. Four of the seven deadly sins in the course of a few hours.

By God, that was the way to spend a day!

This was the life for a man.

They caught up with him a week later. He was tearing away great hunks of flesh from the side of an australopithecine he had killed, when he heard the growl of an internal combustion engine in the distance. He ignored it, crunching ribs and pushing his muzzle into the cavity thus opened in search of the heart.

He liked the heart best. It made him feel more of a predator to eat an animal's heart while it was still warm. How many times had he wished he could do this to one of his competitors? Countless times. Now he could.

The Land Rover pulled up. Two figures got out.

"Having fun?"

George lifted his head from his prey. His muzzle was wet with blood. His eyes, surely, glittered with the savage joy of the kill. He knew that he must look the perfect image of Satanic fury. He grinned.

"I sure am, Doctor Alvarez."

The man standing behind Alvarez involuntarily drew back a step. But she stood her ground. "Well, fun time's over. You've got work to do. I've come to take you back to the station."

He'd noticed the trailer behind the Land Rover, and suspected what it was for. But the australotops was the biggest thing he had killed so far, and he was glad to have witnesses.

"I've got an idea of how a giganotosaur could take out a titanosaur, doctor. If I were to charge it from the side, leap up, and then cling to it with my forearms—they're certainly strong enough; I could use them like grappling hooks—then I could kick quite a gash into its side with my powerful hindlimbs. All I'd have to do then is drop off and follow the titanosaur from a safe distance. Even if it didn't die from loss of blood, the wound would be sure to get infected. *Voila*—a year's supply of hamburger!"

"Mr. Weskowski, nobody is interested in what hunting strategies a dinosaur with a human brain could come up with. We want to learn what hunting strategies it *has*. We want to learn how a giganotosaur really operates. And for that, we need you to come back, cooperate, and apply yourself to your studies."

George threw his head back and laughed. His auditors put their hands over their ears.

"Let me talk to him," the man said then. He was a slender little fellow, with a thin mustache.

"And who are you?" George asked. "I don't believe we've been introduced."

"My name is Ramón Delgado. I'm a doctor of paleontological transition psychology."

"I don't need a psychologist. Especially one with a specialty so new that I'm its only possible subject."

"Mr. Weskowski, please listen to me. You've gone directly from an aged, cancer-ridden body to one that's strong and extremely physical—it makes sense that you'd feel a certain exuberance. A sense of personal invulnerability. But you can't simply break all ties with humankind. Strong as you are, big as you are, you can't exist on your own."

"When I was a kid," George said, "the Speaker of the House was a man named Newt Gingrich. This was back in the United States, you understand, and at that time the Speaker of the House was an extremely powerful man.

"Now, old Newt decided he wanted something to brighten up his office. So he strolled over to the Smithsonian, picked out a *Tyrannosaurus rex* skull from their collection, and took it with him. Oh boy, how the curators hated him for that! But there was nothing they could do about it. Because he had the power. And they were just a bunch of scientists."

"I fail to see the point of your parable," Doctor Delgado said carefully.

"It's simply that there are people who have to do what they're told to do, and people who don't. I'm one of the latter. All my life, I was a renegade, a rule-breaker. Did you know that I was a pioneer in lawsuit futures?"

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with the term."

"It's like junk bonds. You find a potentially profitable lawsuit like, oh, let's say, against automobile manufacturers for making a product that kills tens of thousands of people a year. Now, normally a suit like that, against a multi-billion dollar industry, with countless lawyers and the willingness to spend decades in litigation, isn't worth pursuing. Who can afford to wait that long for the payoff? But here's the beauty part. We made up bonds selling a fixed fraction of the eventual settlement, enough to raise a war chest of several hundred million dollars. And, win or lose, we turned an immediate profit. Suddenly, the most unlikely lawsuits are doable!"

"This worked?" Delgado said dubiously.

"We unleashed a *flood* of lawsuits! The United States of America was paralyzed! The GNP took a nose-dive! They had to pass laws against what we were doing to prevent the collapse of their entire economic system. But of course, by then, I'd already made *my* bundle."

Doctor Delgado looked sick. "You may have made a lot of money," he said. "But at what cost in human suffering? For what?"

"Why, for *this!*" George dipped down to rip off another five-hundred pound chunk of carcass. He swallowed it down whole, distending his throat grotesquely, then continued, "This is my retirement plan. Half my money went into a trust for the grandkids. The other half went to pay for this."

Alvarez stepped forward, her eyes flashing. "No, it only went partway toward paying for this. A great deal of the cost of this project came out of Argentina's science research budget. That's why you had to sign those contracts agreeing to pay us back with your labor as a researcher."

"Too bad," George said complacently. "Looks to me like you negotiated yourself a raw deal."

"We negotiated in good faith, Mr. Weskowski!"

"You forgot to make it *enforceable*. You forgot to come up with a way to make Mr. *Giganotosaurus* give a damn."

He winked and was gone.

Time passed—a season, perhaps less. A cloudy day came when George was ambling moodily across the prairie, moving from stream to stream, watering hole to watering hole, just to see what terror he could stir up among the herbivores. He was feeling rather lonely. More and more, of late, he was feeling lonely. He was contemplating returning to the station, just to see how things were going. He wasn't about to give up his freedom and go to work for them, of course. But he'd learned a lot about being a giganotosaur. Maybe he could barter a bit of information in exchange for some companionship.

It was precisely then that he experienced something unlike anything he had ever felt before.

One instant, everything was normal, and the next, all was changed, changed absolutely. He smelled something! His head whipped around, seemingly of its own volition. Something alluring.

Without understanding why, George found himself running.

What's happening to me? he wondered. His mind felt dazed and confused, helplessly out of control, and at the same time strangely joyous. But the body knew what it wanted, and it knew, too, what to do.

He crashed through the thin fringe of cycads along a stream, and splashed through the water and up the other bank. Leafy branches whipped away from his enormous body, and then he was face to face with the source of his new emotions:

It was another giganotosaur.

But this one was a female, a queen. He could tell by her scent. And she was waiting for him.

He could tell that by her scent too.

Their eyes locked. Mincingly, with coquettish little steps, the queen turned away from him, lowering her head, and raising her tail. Her eyes never left his.

He would have thought that the bulge where the top of his skull had been removed and replaced with a ceramic cap to protect his human forebrain would have made him unattractive to a female giganotosaur. Particularly since the skin that had been force-grown over it was still new and pinkish. But it was obvious that this queen thought him a wholly proper giganotosaur.

She raised her head and made a warbling noise.

George felt a strange surging sensation down below, in his cloaca and penile nubs. Distantly, the human part of him felt a kind of repulsed horror. This is bestiality, it babbled, it's sinful, it's wrong, it's disgusting. But that was mere intellectuation. Waves of chemicals swept up from the brain stem and overwhelmed his thoughts, tumbling and drowning them in wild tides of a lust more pure and primitive than anything he'd ever felt before.

He made a deep sound in the back of his throat.

She answered him.

He moved toward her.

She did not retreat.

They screwed right there in the open. The mechanics of it were awkward. They involved him getting alongside her and slowly forcing her to the ground, and then throwing one leg over her stiff tail, while she twisted around toward him, so their private parts could connect. It wasn't easy. But connect they did, and with a roar of triumph, he entered her.

It didn't last nearly as long as human sex did. Once they had forced their cloacae together, the act was half-done. But the experience was beyond words. It was the apotheosis of physical contact, all need and urgent selfishness, with not a thought for the pleasure or comfort of his partner. It was rutting, pure and simple.

And it felt great.

Once, the queen moved as if to disengage. Quick as a flash, he seized her throat with his sharp-taloned little arms—now he knew what they were good for!—and didn't let go until he'd gotten everything he wanted out of her.

I have another data point for you, Doctor Alvarez, he thought fleetingly. Dino sex is *terrific*. He'd been to Thailand and he'd been to the Philippines, and wherever he'd gone, he'd bought the best. This was better.

Afterward he lay sprawled on his back in the ferns, one foot dangling up in the air, like a tabby rolling in a catnip patch. Maybe I'll get a bumper sticker made up and stick it on my ass, he thought: *Giganotosaurs Do It With Genitalia Bigger Than Your Entire Body.*

He had his eyes closed and was savoring the heat of the sun on their lids when something thumped on the ground beside him.

George opened his eyes. It was a juvenile sauropod leg, torn from a carcass that was, by the smell of it, still reasonably fresh. Above it loomed his queen. Obviously a girl who knew how to take care of her guy.

Then he looked beyond her, and rolled over and up on his feet in astonishment. There were two more giganotosaurs standing behind her!

They were both female as well.

George smiled inwardly. Take a number, ladies, he thought, and we'll see what I can do.

Thus began the best period of his life. The queens filled his days with sex and companionship, hunting with him when he felt the urge, and hunting *for* him when he did not. The vague notion he had been incubating of returning to Old Patagonia Station faded to nothing, like the mists that dissolved each morning with the rising of the Mesozoic sun.

The world was his. He filled it. It existed for him and him alone. He inhabited it in all its aspects.

In George's universe, all that mattered was him and his three queens. They were his posse. They were the street gang he'd never belonged to as a kid. They were the outlaws he'd always wanted to be one of, but never dared approach. They were the bad boys, the bullies, the kids from the wrong side of the track, whose lives had always looked so alluring and dangerous from the vantage point of his staid middle-class upbringing. They took what they wanted, fucked who they wished, did whatever entered their heads, and never asked anyone for permission or forgiveness.

Eat. Fuck. Kill. It was a relationship he could understand. It was life pared down to its essence. And—for a while—life was good.

Then, one day, they turned on him.

It caught him by surprise. The queens had been moody and restless all morning, but what of that? They were dinosaurs. They were carnivores. They were *supposed* to have an attitude.

He was stalking in the lead position when one of his queens, the largest of the three and the one he had known first (Eve he had named her, and the other two were Slut and Scarface, though they would none of them ever know it), lengthened her stride and came up alongside him. He didn't turn to look. There was a australotopsian up ahead—he could smell the fragile life within it, warm and appetizing—and George was hungry. All his attention was focused on his unwary prey.

The queen matched strides with him. Her head twisted to face his.

Suddenly, without warning, she lunged. Her great jaws came crunching down on the side of his face. Those nightmare teeth pierced skin and flesh in a dozen places and, with a hideous grating noise, ground against the bones of his jaw and skull.

Jesus fucking Christ—that *hurt!* The pain was blinding. George jerked away, feeling his tough skin rip like paper as the queen's teeth slid free from his face. She lunged at him again.

He veered clumsily away, only to find that Scarface had come up on his other side, blood-lust in her eyes. Then Slut screamed behind him, and he knew that he had neither friend nor ally in all the world.

He ran.

Blind with panic, he fled. Like furies, the queens pursued him across the rolling prairie. He let them chase him where they would, turning aside when a lake loomed up before him, and then up along a creek that fed into that lake. A stand of cycads forced him into the water, splashing frantically up the sandy stream bed, and then he had neither time nor the presence of mind to climb out. He had no choice but to go upstream, away from the lake.

They hunted him as a team—one queen on each bank, and Eve noisily splashing in the stream behind him.

The banks rose to either side, which was all to the good, for it meant that only the one queen was an immediate danger to him. But sooner or later the stream would narrow, which was disastrous, for he knew that if ever Scarface and Slut got into a position to jump on him from above, they would do it.

He had seen them practice such hunting maneuvers before.

He ran in abject terror, leaping the fallen logs that formed dams and bridges across the water, slipping on the layers of wet leaves that gathered at the bottom of the creek's still pools, stumbling on sudden changes in texture of the creek bed. How many times had he run down game with them in this exact same manner? A dozen? A hundred? It hardly mattered.

Now it was his turn.

Ravening, the giganotosaurs harried him up the stream.

So this is what terror feels like, he thought crazily. The water smashed underfoot and branches whipped his face. His legs ached and his lungs burned, and yet the queens—who could have been no less exhausted—did not fall back. They could smell his blood, and having smelled blood were mad for the kill. They screamed like harpies.

It made no sense, damn it. It wasn't rational! What did the bitches want from him? If they meant to drive him away—then, yes, he would go, and happily, and never once look back, damn them. They didn't need to keep chasing him! But if they were hungry, there was a world full of game that could be run down with a fraction of the effort they were expending now. Anyway, he was a carnivore—no animal killed a carnivore for food unless it was literally starving. His flesh simply wouldn't taste good!

It didn't make sense. It just wasn't fair.

Why couldn't they see that?

Coming around a curve he saw that the stream ahead ran straight and true, and for an instant his heart lifted, for he dared hope that he could put on a burst of speed here that would discourage and leave behind his pursuers. But then he raised his sight to the next bend, and all hope died within him.

A great mound of dead trees and branches, twice his height, clogged the bed there. The shallow stream as it was now could never have held such a load. This tangle had been deposited here by a spring flood that had swollen the creek far beyond its present banks, and then, subsiding, left its burden of debris behind.

There was no way around the thing—not without climbing up into the waiting jaws of either Scarface or Slut.

He would have to climb over it.

It was not at all certain that he *could* climb over it, though. The near-uselessness of his tiny forelimbs would make it extremely difficult. As would the three raging queens snapping at his heels, ready to leap upon him should he fall. There had to be some alternative.

Frantically he wracked his brain. Wildly, he looked around for some way—any way!—out of this predicament.

There was none.

So when he came to the tangle, he tried to run straight up it. His tremendous foot landed solid on one of the logs. He twisted his body and leaped for a second. That seized, he leaned his body forward, chest sliding against the branches, and surged upward. His feet scrabbled for purchase. He was now his own height above the streambed, and still climbing. He tried to fight his way yet higher.

And failed.

A log rolled under his feet, and simultaneously Eve arrived at the log jam to find him out of her reach. Furiously she rammed her head into the tangle like a powerful hammer. The combination of his weight and her force set everything into motion.

The other two queens, meanwhile, had jumped down from the bank and were trying to reach him from either side. Screaming in rage, they leaped upon the overtoppling deadwood, splintering branches and further destabilizing the entire mass.

All the world shifted underfoot. George fell over backward, and the pile on top of him. Logs tumbled and rolled over onto his chest.

A roaring confusion of noise filled his ears. He felt a leg *snap* between two tree trunks.

Through a haze of pain, he saw logs settling down over him.

The queens had leaped away when the deadwood began to slide. Now they returned to see if they could get at him. Once! Twice! Three times they rammed their massive heads against the pile, trying to force a way to George's still body.

They could not. George was pinned down at the bottom of the pile, and no application of giganotosaur strength would suffice to dig him free. He was there permanently.

Finally, they left him for dead.

He was not dead, though. He only wished he were. Lying half-in and half-out of the water, with the crushing weight of the logs pressing down upon him, George rested his head against the cool, cool mud, and prayed for an end to his pain.

It did not come.

After a time he noticed a protorat staring at him from deep within the tangled wood, its eyes glittery with terror. Looking back, he remembered a time, not many days ago, when for amusement he had stood spraddle-legged and motionless for almost an hour by the burrow of one of this creature's small mammalian kinsfolk. Waiting . . . waiting with dinosaur patience for the beastie to emerge, blinking and optimistic, into the dawn of an age that would soon, within another few tens of millions of years, end with the extinction of the dinosaurs and the opportunistic rise of this insignificant vermin's offspring.

His patience had been rewarded. At last the creature had come forth, a small, hairy, and undistinguished animal, and quite possibly the direct ancestor of Man.

The timid little thing reared up on its hind legs directly in front of George's stupendous body. Wee ancestor, George thought, you've just won the grand prize in the Evolution's Clearing House Sweepstakes. When I and my kind are gone, your descendents will get to rule everything.

Then he had pissed on it.

How many gallons of urine had he drenched the little bastard with? Impossible to say. It was a lot, anyway. Battered and hysterical, the mammal had fled back into the ground. George had roared with laughter then, over and over, startling and confusing his queens and shocking the prairie into fearful silence.

"Come to get your revenge, have you?" George muttered. "Going to defend the honor of your kind by gnawing on my bones?"

But there was no radio anywhere near to receive his words, and even if the protorat could have heard them, it wouldn't've understood. In any event, it did not move. Its chest trembled with panicky breath and its dread-filled eyes jerked every time George shifted his gaze, but otherwise it was motionless.

"Well, you're in luck," George continued. "I'm trapped, I'm in pain, and I don't think I'm ever going to get out of here." Those marcasite eyes jerked again, and George scowled. "Why are you still here? If you're so afraid of me, why haven't you *run?*"

He focused all his attention on the beast and discovered what he had missed before: That its tail was caught between two logs. It was as trapped as he was.

There was irony here, if he only knew how to read it. Here he was, the biggest, meanest bruiser ever to walk the Earth—helpless. He was as irrevocably trapped as the weak, fearful creature quivering before him. They were one in their dilemma.

Well, these past few months excepted, when *hadn't* he been trapped? Caught up in his work, entangled in a marriage that had slowly turned gray and joyless, sand-bagged by a detective with a camera in a hotel room in Albany and subsequently shafted in the divorce settlement, and finally, at age seventy-two, painted into a corner by his firm's mandatory retirement policy.

And what did he have to show for it all?

Now that he was going to die, what was he leaving behind? One very wealthy ex, three kids who didn't particularly care for him (not that he blamed them), and four of the sweetest grandchildren anybody had ever laid eyes on. The grandchildren, anyway, were good. The rest was not.

He'd made a pot of money over a long lifetime running with the wolves in the financial markets, and spent it all on a much shorter lifetime running with the giganotosaurs in the wild. And in the end, everybody—humans and dinosaurs alike—he'd trusted had turned on him.

It only confirmed what he'd learned long ago. There was no loyalty in this world. Every man lived alone, and he died alone as well. That was simply the way it was.

Something squeaked.

It was a very small sound, but it brought his attention back, with a start, to the trapped protorat.

The animal's tail was caught in the junction of two logs, the uppermost of which also lay across the top of his own head and shoulder. He could not hope to free himself from the wood pile. But if he summoned all his strength, he could shift the logs a little. Not enough to do him any good. But maybe enough to free the terrified mammal.

"I *could* do it," George said, "but I'm not going to. If I have to die, then so do you."

The protorat stared at him uncomprehendingly, still afraid.

For a long moment he said nothing.

Then:

"All right, you sonofabitch," he rumbled, "live!"

He heaved his shoulder and the logs parted for an instant, freeing the protorat's tail.

In a flash, it was gone.

"Didn't even . . . stay around long enough to say . . . thanks, did you?" George said. This last, pointless expenditure of energy had just about used him up. He didn't have any more reserves of strength to draw on. "Your descendents . . . are going to be . . . just like you."

Still—and inexplicably, for what use was a protorat's life to anyone, even itself?—it made him feel better knowing that if he had to die, he could at least postpone the experience for something else.

Just as his eyes were closing for what he was convinced was the last time, he heard a throbbing noise, like the warm and beating heart of the world opening to him, to share with him some desperately important revelation. Lying with his face half in the water, he listened. And in the instant before the darkness closed around him, he penetrated the secret of that sound, and knew it for what it was:

A helicopter.

Grayness wrapped itself about him then, like a thick wool blanket, and he fell into a troubled, painful sleep. Once he heard somebody say, "Oh, man, this is going to take a *lot* of antibiotic!" and then no more.

"Well, if it isn't Peter Pan!"

"Doctor Alvarez," George mumbled. He did not meet her eyes. "And Doctor Delgado, too. It's good to see you."

"You're lucky we've been monitoring your vital signs," Alvarez said. "Otherwise, you'd be dead."

"I know," George said meekly. Then, "You . . . had a chip in me? You knew where I was all the time?"

"It was in your contract. Surely you read it through."

"Oh, yeah. I remember now." George was hanging from the center of the barn in a kind of makeshift sling-and-traction arrangement. One leg was plastered into a cast. There were bandages everywhere, and wide strips of tape wrapped tightly around his chest. He'd been told some ribs were broken.

"So what happened?"

"My queens attacked me." George felt a great emptiness, a bottomless sense of betrayal. "For no reason! One minute everything was great, the next minute—*bam!* Doctor Alvarez, why did they do that? Why?"

"Your queens were in heat when you met them. Giganotosaurs, like every other theropod we know of, are only periodically interested in sex. Once the mating season was over they weren't interested in having you around anymore. You can't blame them for this—male giganotosaurs will eat their young if given the chance. We would have told you this, if you'd only listened."

"Oh."

He'd been a fool. Vast landscapes of his self-delusion opened up before him. Tears filled his great eyes. He hadn't known that dinosaurs could cry.

Doctor Alvarez snorted disdainfully. "This is what you wanted, Mr. Weskowski—nature red in fang and claw, right? Only, in *reality,* life in the wild is usually solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

He made an unhappy noise in his throat.

But now Doctor Delgado stepped forward. "Please, Maria," he said admonishingly. "You're not helping. Go away." And to George: "I want to read something to you. I got this out of the library when I heard you were being air-lifted back to the station. It's from a sermon by John Donne, and I think you're capable of understanding it now." He got out a small brown leather-jacketed book from his pocket, adjusted his glasses, smoothed down his mustache with two nervous strokes of a long, lean finger, and began to read:

"No man is an island, entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee."

He looked up again, a serious expression on his narrow intellectual face. "You tried to declare independence from humanity, and for several reasons it didn't work. Some of these reasons are pragmatic—access to decent medical care being one of them. Others, though, are matters of the soul. You never *were* a giganotosaur, you know. Only a man riding on top of one."

For a second time, George's eyes filled with tears.

"Well, Mr. Weskowski," Delgado said. "Are you ready to rejoin the human race?"

It was a bright Cretaceous morn.

Claw-winged archaeopteryxes were singing in the trees. The gently mournful cry of the rebbachosaur sounded over the prairie. Dawn mice were scuttling furtively about, harvesting seed from the flowering plants that flourished in the shade of the woods. George ignored them. He stood waiting, as still and motionless as a billboard.

He'd been working for weeks following a small herd of titanosaurs, studying their behavior, their eating patterns, their rudimentary social structure. He could do that, for his smell was familiar and unthreatening to the titanosaurs, where that of humans was not. Every night, after they'd bedded down, he'd transmitted his findings back to Old Patagonia Station.

An engine sounded in the distance.

This was not the first, but only the most recent of many such studies. He'd proven himself time after time as a capable and hard-working researcher. Now he was waiting for his reward.

The engine noise grew steadily louder. It peaked and crescendoed. Almost here. George found himself trembling with excitement.

A jeep came up over the rise, and slowed to a noisy stop. Alvarez was in the driver's seat. She cut the engine and slammed open a door. "Everybody out!" she shouted.

The children came tumbling out of the jeep, laughing and shouting. They fell silent when they saw George.

He stretched out his arms toward them. "Come on, kids!" he cried joyfully. "Let Grampa give you a ride on his back!" ○

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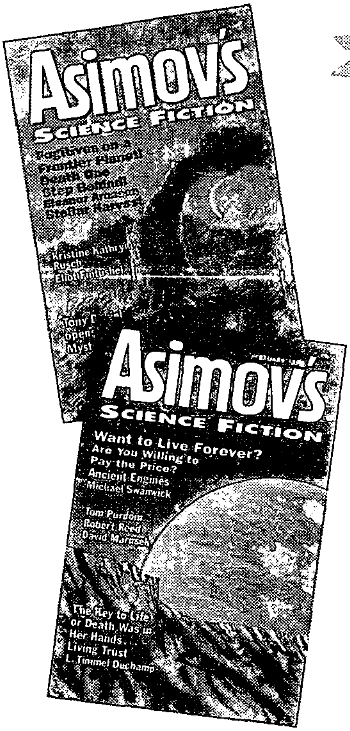
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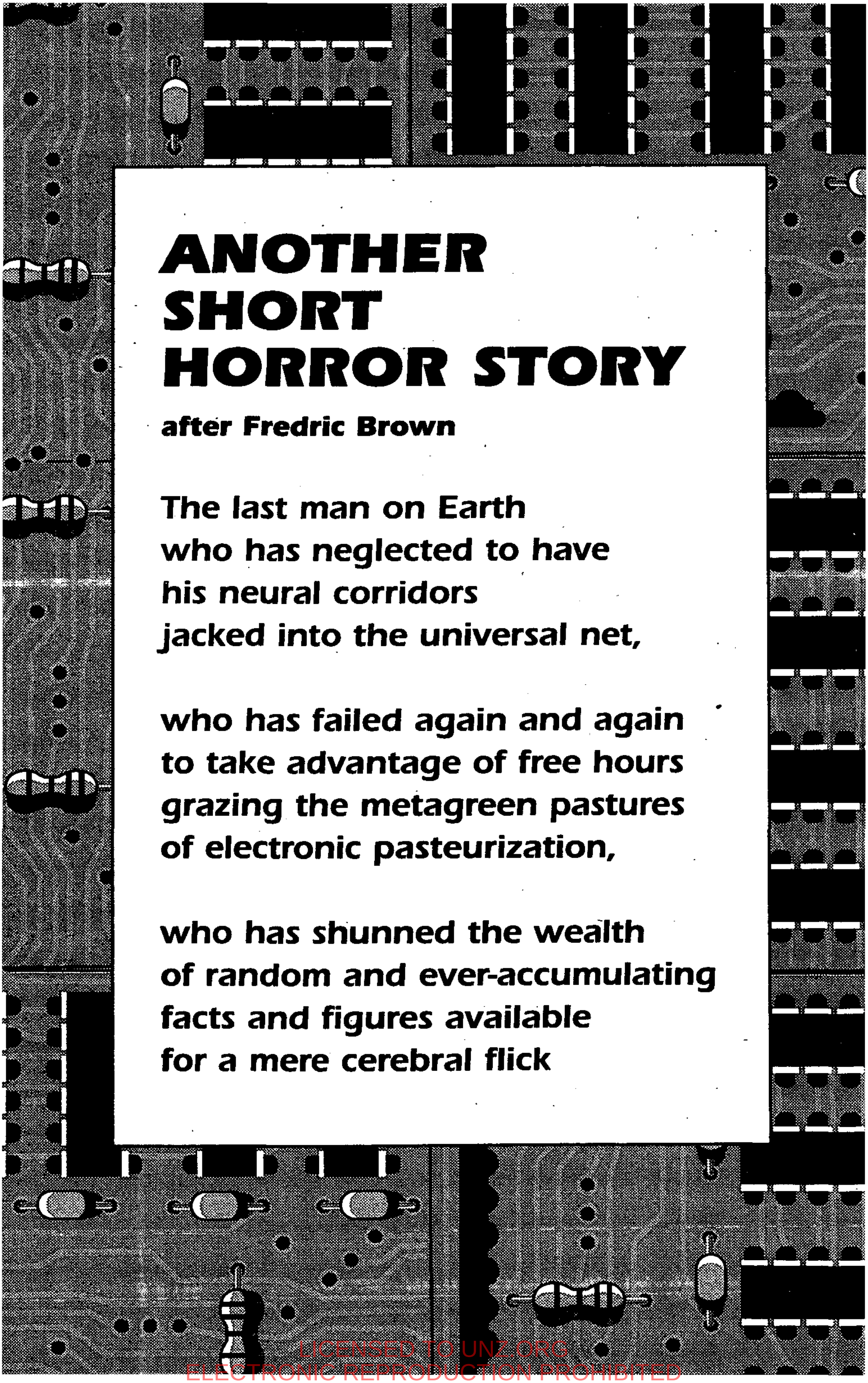


ANOTHER SHORT HORROR STORY

after Fredric Brown

The last man on Earth
who has neglected to have
his neural corridors
jacked into the universal net,

who has failed again and again
to take advantage of free hours
grazing the metagreen pastures
of electronic pasteurization,

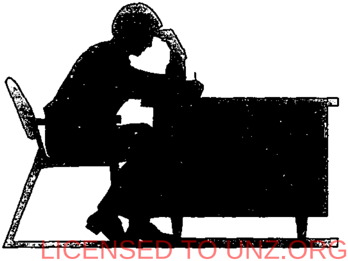
who has shunned the wealth
of random and ever-accumulating
facts and figures available
for a mere cerebral flick

of a virtual wrist,
—such a fool as this!—
pristine in his flesh,
without wires or circuits

or optical implants,
lacking the barest essentials
of cybernetic augmentation,
sits alone in an actual room.

No one knocks on the door.

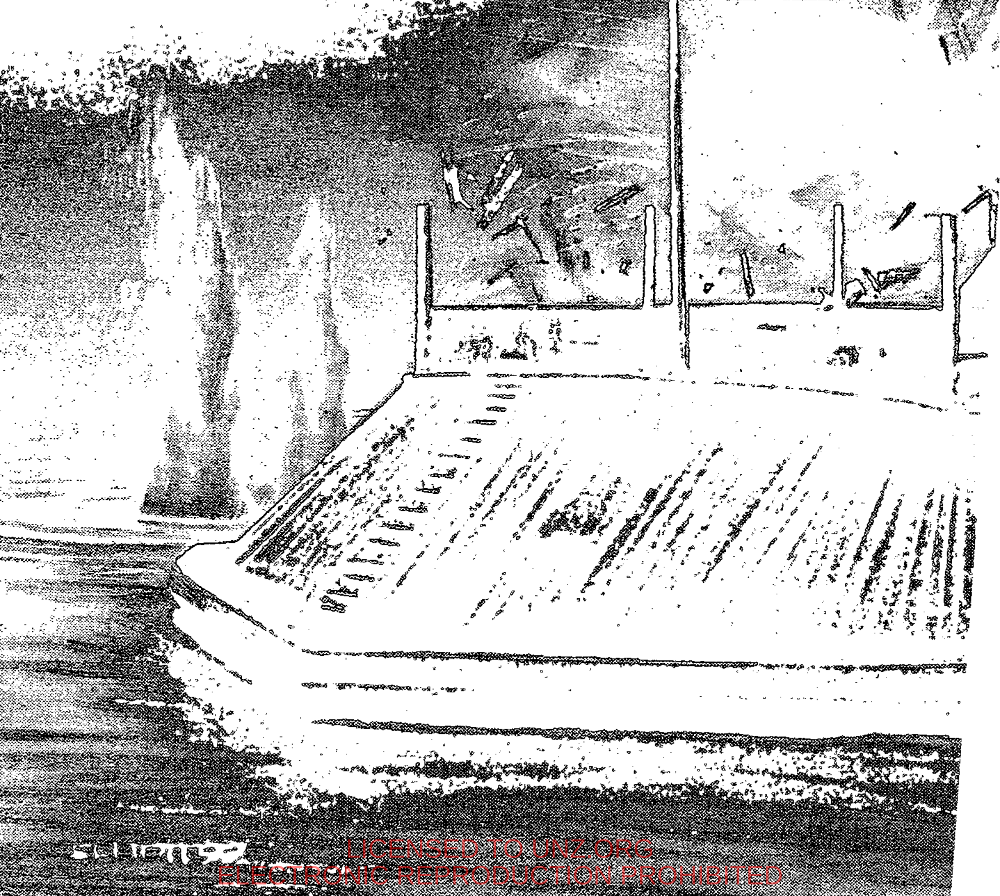
—Bruce Boston



Walter Jon Williams

Walter Jon Williams's last story for *Asimov's*, "Lethe" (September 1997), was a 1998 Nebula Award finalist. His most recent novel, *The Rift*, is described as a "disaster epic dealing with a major earthquake on the New Madrid Fault in the central US." In his new tale, Mr. Williams fashions a remarkable gunboat for a spellbinding alternate history story that juxtaposes Jason's search for the Golden Fleece against a desperate American Civil War quest. Thrilling river battles, electrifying chases, and outrageous betrayals are only some of the incidents assembled in the author's stunning . . .

ARGONAUTICA



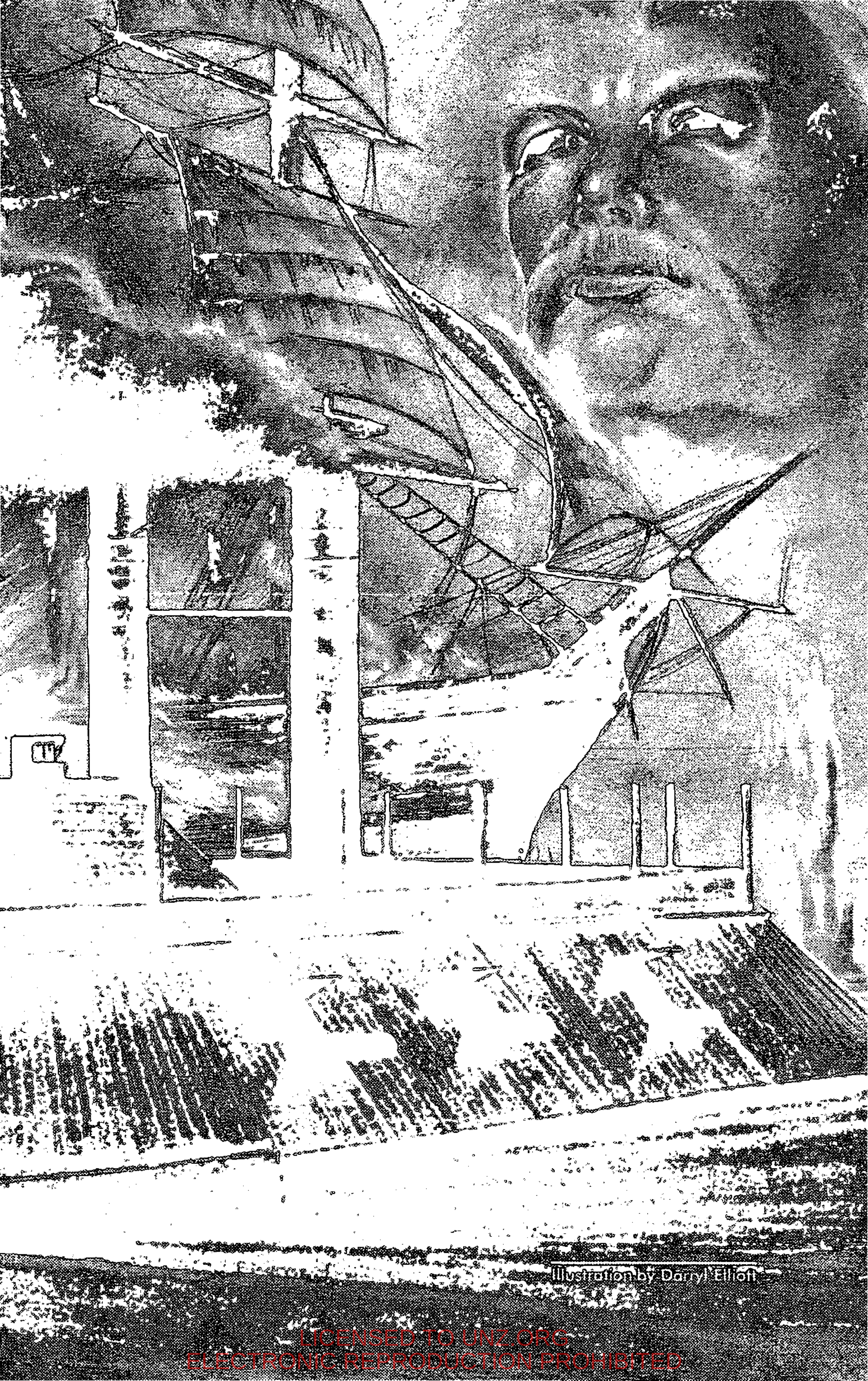


Illustration by Darryl Elliott

1.
Pelias meeteth the One-Sandaled Man

Jase Miller first saw the iron monster in its improvised drydock off the Yazoo. The huge creature had her nose into the land and showed her armored ass to the river. Her twin stacks and rust-red casemate loomed above the flat Old River country like a visitation from another world. Laboring darkies swarmed over the thing like ants. Even over the sound of the *General Bee*'s engine, Jase could hear the ring of hammers on railroad iron.

"There she lies," he thought, "and I am going to have her or get hung."

"Not as big as I thought," said Ensign Harry Klee, who had seen *Louisiana* before she burned.

"Big enough," said Jase, and wondered again how he would steal her. By indirections find directions out, he thought.

He signaled the engine room for ahead slow, then tapped the bell twice to send a leadsman to the bow for soundings. *General Bee* dropped off its bow wave, slowed in the murky water. Shoreward, a cottonmouth moccasin bared its fangs from the safety of an oak limb.

Strange country, Jase thought. He was a salt-water sailor, and unused to the ways of rivers. The meandering Yazoo country was simultaneously open and constricted—absolutely flat, though with all its sight lines hemmed in by dense hardwood forests. Cypress, willows, cottonwoods, all thirsty trees that clung to the banks of the river. Everything that stood was strung with vines. There were alligators here, and snakes; herons and cormorants flocked in thousands.

And it was hot. Hot as a boiler room. Jase yearned for a sea breeze.

"By the mark three!" sang the leadsman. "Half less three! By the mark twain!"

Jase maneuvered the tug toward the bank, signaled astern slow, and brought the *Bee* gently to ground on Yazoo mud. The levee began to fill with curious bystanders.

Ensign Klee's huge body almost blocked the pilothouse window. "Any of them look much like a senator to you, Jase?" he said.

Jase peered around Klee. "May be the fellow in the top hat."

Harry Klee squinted and spat. "He looks more like an undertaker."

"Guess I'll go ashore and find out."

Jase rolled down his shirt sleeves and put on his grey uniform jacket—visiting a former senator required a degree of formality—then he adjusted his straw boater and made his way past the thirty-pound Parrott rifle on the foredeck. Once there, he discovered that the mechanism for lowering the gangway had jammed.

"Sorry, sir," said Castor, one of the twins, in his cockney accent. "I'll 'ave it fixed in a tick."

Jase looked at the group of people standing on the levee and felt his temper rise. He decided he was not about to stand and be gawked at while he waited for the gangway to be repaired, so he dropped off the bow and waded to the land, wet above the knee. The Yazoo mud took one of his boots, which did not improve his temper. He splashed ashore and mounted the four-foot-high levee in one stride.

"Senator Pendergas?" he asked the fellow in the top hat.

The man shook his head. "That's the general there," he said, "coming this way."

The senator—now a general—was a broad, round-headed man in shirt sleeves, striped uniform pants held across his big belly by red suspenders. His shirt front was stained with tobacco. When Jase saluted him, Pendergas held out one big hand and waited for Jase to shake it. Jase did as the man seemed to want.

"Lt. Jase Miller, C.S.N., commanding the *General Bee*," Jase said.

"Glad to meet you," Pendergas said, for all the world as if Jase were a constituent.

"Let me have men about me that are fat," Jase thought, "Sleek-headed men and such as sleep o' nights." And felt inwardly pleased.

"You got any engineers?" the senator asked. "I'm having problems with my engines."

"I've got *Navy* engineers," Jase said. Because Pendergas was Army, and so was his boat apparently. And on account of the first point, Jase aimed to change the second.

Pendergas looked at him with little eyes half-hidden by lids of fat. "We can work something out, I reckon."

"I am ordered to cooperate with you, sir."

Pendergas spat tobacco onto the grass. "Well, that's good. Because you and me, that's all the South has to defend Vicksburg."

Which was, Jase reflected, sadly true. A few months ago Flag Officer Davis had taken Memphis with his Yankee river squadron. Farragut had captured New Orleans with his salt-water flotilla, then steamed up the Mississippi, right past Vicksburg's batteries, to join Davis north of the city. With the two Yankee fleets united, it was clear that Vicksburg was next on their agenda, and the South didn't have much to stop them.

Pendergas looked down at Jase's stockinged foot. "Ain't the Navy issuing full sets of boots these days?"

"The Navy issued the full set," Jase said, "but nobody told me the Yazoo River was planning on collecting a toll."

Pendergas curled a lip at this sorry example of wit. "Let's hope the Yankees don't get the other," he said. "And your boat with it."

There was a rushing sound as the *Bee* blew steam. Pendergas's little eyes almost disappeared into his fleshy face as he looked at the *General Bee*.

"What kind of boat has the Navy given me, Jase?"

Chill mirth crept round Jase's brain. So Pendergas thought the Navy had given him a boat, did he? They would see whose boat would be given to whom.

"Armed tugboat, sir, escaped from New Orleans before it fell," he said. "We carry a thirty-pound Parrott bow chaser, a twenty-pound Parrott aft, and a twenty-four-pound smoothbore on each broadside."

Pendergas's lip curled again. "And no more armor than a country whorehouse," he said.

"Oh, a little more than that," Jase said. He had built waist-high log structures around the cannon to protect the gunners, and stacked bales of cotton around the pilot house, the boiler, and wherever else he thought it might do any good, but there wasn't much else that could be done. The *Bee* had been built as a tugboat, taken into the Navy because the Navy had no other vessels, and then named after a man who had been dead since First Manassas. None of these omens seemed particularly auspicious.

"Well," Pendergas said, "come and look at *Arcola*, and I'll show you the boat the Army's going to use to clean Farragut off the river." He turned toward the rust-red monster he was building in his cotton field, and raised his voice. "Argus! Argus McBride!"

Limping on his one stockinged foot, Jase followed the senator toward the drydock. McBride turned out to be an old man, with a shock of white hair and a handshake dry as sand.

"Formerly of the New Orleans, Galveston, and Great Northern Railroad," Pendergas said proudly. "He's rebuilding *Arcola* for me."

Argus looked at Jase skeptically. "You wouldn't know anything about triple-expansion marine engines, would you?"

"I'm your man," said Jase.

The senator clapped Jase on the shoulder. "Good boy! I knew we could use you!"

"If you like, I will send for my chief," Jase said, "and we'll look at the engines together."

While they waited for Chief Tyrus to come from *General Bee,* Pendergas and Argus proudly showed him over the armored ram they were building on the Yazoo.

Arcola had started life as the *Mingo,* one of the Ellet rams that had sunk the entire Confederate River Defense Fleet in about ten minutes during the Battle of Memphis a few months ago. A few days after the battle, *Mingo* had blown its boiler while on patrol, drifted down the Mississippi, and come aground on a sand bar, where it was captured by a corporal's guard that rowed over from shore. "*My* corporal's guard!" Pendergas bellowed in amusement, and jabbed Jase in the ribs with an elbow.

President Jefferson Davis, who had served Mississippi in the Senate alongside Pendergas, had obliged his colleague at the war's start with a brigadier's commission. But—possibly because Senate experience had given the president a good notion of Pendergas's capabilities—Pendergas had never actually been given the opportunity to command a combat unit. Until his corporal's guard rowed out to the sandbar to demand *Mingo*'s surrender, Pendergas's sole war experience had been to raise regiments and supplies in safe rear areas, which he shipped off north to the fighting army.

Pendergas knew an opportunity when he saw it. He hauled *Mingo* off the sand and hid her up the Yazoo, on one of his plantations. His slaves dug day and night to build a drydock here in his cotton field while he assembled the men and equipment necessary to turn his captured Yankee boat into a monster that would devour the republic that gave it birth.

Argus showed Jase the foot-thick wooden bulkheads that ran the length of the boat, to strengthen it for ramming, and the bows packed with timber to increase the power of the blow. The two triple-expansion engines, driving screw propellers, were braced for the shock of ramming and were able to drive the *Mingo* at fifteen knots.

The Yankee *Mingo,* built purely as a ram, carried no armor or guns, but Argus had changed that. He had covered the ram with a two-foot-thick casemate of oak, angled like a pitched roof so that shot would bounce off, and then plated the oak with two layers of railroad iron, the rails ingeniously rolled and slotted, riveted and spiked and racked together to present a smooth rust-red surface impenetrable to enemy shot. A pilothouse had been built atop the casemate forward, steel bars stacked like the logs of a frontier cabin and welded into a roughly pyramidal shape, with an open top.

Bellona's bridegroom lapp'd in proof, Jase thought.

While building his ram the senator had also been scavenging guns. A massive ten-inch Dahlgren smoothbore was to be mounted forward, pivoting on tracks so that it could fire from forward, port, or starboard gunports. A seven-inch Brooke rifle was to be similarly mounted in the stern. Each broadside consisted of three bottle-shaped thirty-two-pound smoothbore cannons, making six altogether. Rather than being placed opposite each other on each broadside, the guns were staggered down the length of the narrow ram, to allow each big gun room for recoil.

Jase wondered if either Argus or Pendergas realized how much the iron and guns would degrade the ram's performance. They wouldn't be getting fifteen knots out of this boat ever again. They'd be lucky to see half that.

And they didn't seem to know anything about ballast, either. All that iron topside was going to make the ram roll like a drunken whore unless they stowed more weight below the waterline.

Still, it would be a good boat, more than a match for anything the Yankees had in the water. Jase's mouth watered at the thought of commanding her.

"We can't seem to get the carriages right," Argus said. "That's why the guns ain't in her. None of us have ever made gun carriages before."

"My men can help you with that," Jase said.

"I'm gonna knock Farragut's flagship to splinters," Pendergas said, "see if I don't."

Jase kept silent on this point.

He had plans of his own.

2.

Jason, Herakles, and Tiphys of Siphae journey to the Temple

Jase and his officers, Harry Klee and Chief Tyrus, were invited to the big house for supper. Jase always enjoyed the sight of Klee's huge body stuffed into a dress uniform, the cannonball-shaped head glowering from beneath a cocked hat while his thick neck bulged out from around the collar and neckcloth.

The senator's plantation house was a quarter-mile inland through cotton fields. Long Shanks—which Jase imagined was Longchamps creatively spelled by its owner—was a big place of raw red brick and cypress wood, too new to have acquired the white plaster and stately pillared portico that would eventually turn it into a miniature Greek temple somehow misplaced in the bogs of Mississippi. Folks hereabouts even hired artists from Europe to paint false grain on their cypress wood to make it look like a less common brand of timber.

Jase thought it was pretty odd what rich people spent their money on, but he watched the rich carefully when he could. He aimed to be rich himself, and he wanted to learn their ways.

Mrs. Pendergas was as stout as her husband and chewed at least as much tobacco, spitting with casual accuracy into a silver ladies' spittoon designed so as not to get tobacco juice on her skirts. Jase bowed over her hand when he was introduced—on one plump finger there was a diamond the size of a robin's egg—and when he straightened he saw a fat crab louse sitting on Mrs. Pendergas's head. The louse eyed him with a look of the same suspicion that the senator's lady was giving him at just that moment.

Jase promised himself he would find reason not to accept any offer to lodge at Long Shanks. At least he knew his own boat was clean of vermin.

Interesting, Jase thought, these Mississippi gentry. Out east, in the Carolina tidewater where Jase had been raised, the planters made a display of their manners and elegance and breeding, but Mississippi had been raw frontier just a generation ago, nothing but swamp and cypress, and the folks who lived here were still people of the frontier. Very little on the Yazoo had been papered over—neither the plantation houses nor the people had gained a veneer of elegance, and life was still lived in the raw. Ambition was for masters, submission for slaves, and sheer violence the means to wealth.

They had come out West to get rich, these people. Jase figured it was something he and the planters had in common.

Accompanying them was one of Pendergas's aides, a young, soft-spoken artillery lieutenant that the senator introduced, with a twinkle in his eye, as "Euphemism." There was obviously a story behind this, one that Euphemism thought a good deal less funny than Pendergas, but the young lieutenant was so quiet and retiring that Jase thought it better not to ask.

The Pendergases kept a good cook, though. Navy vittles had sharpened Jase's appetite for the real thing, and he tucked into the pickled oysters, goose, beefsteak, and fresh greens with a will, and washed it down with the senator's French champagne. The dinner conversation focused on the war, and on the senator's opinions of the various commanders, none of which were favorable.

Pillow was a coward, according to the senator, Van Dorn a fool, Beauregard a vain, posturing frog-eater, and Johnston—*any* Johnston—an idiot. Pendergas bore a grudging respect for Robert Lee, who had just driven McClellan from his post before Richmond and saved the capital, but he implied that Lee had just been lucky.

Pendergas dwelt at some length on a master plan of campaign that he had submitted to the president, which involved the senator's raising a new army around Jackson, then striking north to the Ohio while the other forces in the West acted as his auxiliaries. Mr. Davis had not, as yet, offered a response to his onetime colleague, so Pendergas was planning on using his new ironclad ram to attract attention and glory to himself and to make his plan irresistible to those in authority. Jase nodded and expressed his admiration of this plan, and silently concluded that the senator felt acutely his lack of a meaningful assignment.

"And about yourself, Captain Miller?" Mrs. Pendergas asked. "Have you seen any fighting?"

"Mr. Miller," Pendergas said heavily, "is a lieutenant, my dear."

"Oh, he's a captain, too," said Tyrus. "His *rank* is lieutenant, but he's captain of the *Bee,* and that's what we call him."

"It is a *courtesy* title, then," Pendergas said.

Jase nodded to the senator. "Just as you may be a brigadier general, but you will also be captain of the *Arcola.*"

Pendergas nodded, pleased with this idea. He wiped gravy off his beard with a napkin the size of a tablecloth.

"But to answer your question, ma'am," Jase said, nodding to Mrs. Pendergas, "yes, I saw action in the privateer *Mobile* under Captain Markham. We took six prizes last year, if you remember, and sank the *Catskill* gunboat off Pensacola."

Privateers were something of an anachronism in the modern world, Jase knew, but they didn't have to take orders from dim-witted politicians, and they got to make a profit on their captures. Jase had, in theory, made a tidy sum when the *Mobile*'s six prizes were sold, but the profit was all on paper, and Jase still hadn't seen a cent of the money. That had soured him on privateering.

And then, in a gallant act of generosity, Captain Markham had *given* his privateer to the Confederacy as a warship, and the government had obliged him by giving him captain's rank in the Navy. Jase Miller found himself without a job, and there didn't seem to be any privateers fitting out, so in an ill-considered outburst of patriotism he had joined the Navy as well, just a few months before Ellet's rams put most of the Confederate Navy at the bottom of the Mississippi.

He should have looked for work as a blockade runner, he knew now. That's where the money was.

"Where are you getting crew?" Jase asked, as he accepted one of the senator's cigars and strolled to the drawing room.

"Called for volunteers among artillery batteries," Pendergas said. "Got sixty gunners that way. Got the beginnings of an engine room crew from the railroads and some unemployed steamboat men." He lit a lucifer match and paused with his cigar half-raised to his lips. "We'll fill up the crew with field hands. Servants."

The senator puffed his cigar alight while Jase exchanged glances with Harry Klee. "You're using slaves to fill up your crew?" Harry asked.

"Servants," Pendergas nodded, using the euphemism common among planters. "The niggers can haul ropes and shovel coal as well as anyone." He saw the dubious look on Harry's face and tried to reassure him. "It'll be white men who steer the boat and point the guns, don't worry."

An old trick, Jase knew, to make money. Some planters had tried it in the Old Navy—they put their slaves on board as crew, and while the slaves worked, the owners pocketed the slaves' pay for themselves. The practice wasn't common, because most Navy captains refused outright to enroll slaves, but some captains with Southern sympathies had permitted the practice.

But not even the most fire-eating Southern captain, no matter how colossal his greed, had ever for an instant considered putting sixty or eighty slaves on his warship. The idea was sheer lunacy.

Harry Klee's thick neck swelled inside his collar. "But, General Pendergas," he said, "slaves—servants—they won't fight for you. Not like free men."

The senator gave Klee a complacent look. "They'll do what I tell 'em. They always do." His diamond stickpin glittered in the lantern light. "They'll all tell you, Boss Pendergas is a fair man. The whip and the branding iron only for those who deserve it, apple jack on Sundays, and I keep my drivers away from their women. Everybody works hard at Long Shanks, but nobody works harder than me." He nodded. "So they'll fight for me, I reckon. They know what's good for me is good for them."

"But sir—" Harry was about to continue his protest, but Jase caught his eye and gave a slight shake of the head.

The last thing he wanted was to keep Pendergas clear of disaster.

Jase looked at the senator. "Well, how you make up your crew is your business," he said. "But what your gun crews'll need is training, and my boys from the *Bee*'ll be happy to provide it."

"Thankee," Pendergas said.

"In fact, once your men get to know the ropes a little, we might have some competition between your men and mine."

A red reflection glowed briefly in the senator's eyes as he drew at his cigar. "Perhaps a little wager on the outcome?" he suggested.

Jase smiled. "I think the Navy would be happy to bet on a sure thing," he said.

"A sure thing?" Pendergas seemed amused. "You figure your little boat's able to give my boys a challenge?"

"I'm counting on it," Jase said, and took a long pull on his cigar.

3.

Jason plans to recruit the Argonauts

"I want you to mix with *Arcola*'s crew," Jase told Harry and Tyrus as they strolled back to the levee. "Get to know them. Get to be their friends. I'll make sure you have access to the *Bee*'s spirit locker—they're going to be thirsty men after working on that monster all day." He smiled. "Have less than thou showest, Speak less than thou knowest, Lend less than thou owest."

"Ain't got money to lend nowheres, anyhow," Klee said. "Those white crew, they ain't gonna be happy to work with blacks."

"And it's *dangerous,*" Tyrus said. "Asking a slave to fight for his master is like asking a steer to fight for the honor of the slaughterhouse. The quicker the *Arcola* surrenders, the sooner the blacks get their freedom."

"I want you to point this out to the senator's crew," Jase said. "And every time you catch any of the officers or crew making a mistake, I want you to point that out, too. I want you to let them know that they ain't getting proper instruction from proper sailors." He smiled. "Once Pendergas's crew realizes that the senator plans on taking 'em straight out on their lonesomes to fight Farragut's whole fleet, with niggers making up half the crew and no real officers among 'em, I figure they'll be looking for a way out." He looked out at the *General Bee,* lying like a shadow against the levee. "And a way out," he said, "is just what we'll give 'em."

4.

Jason's history is related

Jase had grown up on the Charleston waterfront, the scrawny red-haired runt in a litter of roughneck brothers. As a boy he wandered over the wharfs, imagining Spanish galleons choked with gold as his eyes roamed over the ships. Charleston's elegant gentry didn't give a damn whether he was educated or not, but his parents did—his God-fearing mother made sure he had his letters, and his father, a saloon keeper, pounded pieces of the Bible and Shakespeare into him with a stick. But the sea was what drew him, and when he was twelve he took his first voyage, as a captain's servant, past brick Fort Sumter to Havana.

He alternated working on ships with working in his father's saloon until his maternal uncle was finally rewarded for a lifetime of toadying the Democrats with a postmaster's job in Alexandria, Virginia. This was close enough to Washington for him to get within smelling distance of some real patronage: soon all Jase's relations were working for the post office. And

Jase himself, somewhat to his surprise, found himself with an appointment to the Naval Academy.

Annapolis was easier than he'd expected. He already knew practical seamanship and navigation: spherical trigonometry was as natural to him as breathing. The discipline and hazing were milder, and far less arbitrary, than what he got at home from his parents and brothers.

Relations between the South Carolina wharf rat and other young naval gentlemen were more problematical. They had money, connections, and social elegance: Jase had a world of experience that, at Annapolis, didn't count for a damn. He hated the Southerners because they were rich, lazy, and stupid. He hated the Yankees because they were rich, ambitious, and Yankees. He kept his chin tucked and his fists clenched. He got a reputation as a vicious fighter, a wolverine with whom, in the end, it was easiest not to tangle.

When he finally got his commission he was glad to be at sea again. All he needed was a good war and he'd make himself rich off prize money. In the absence of prize money, he'd settle for a ship of his own. Instead there were long cruises to show the flag in the Mediterranean and mind-numbing months off Guinea on anti-slavery patrol. The only good tour was under Markham in the *Constellation*. Markham wasn't bad, for a rich planter.

He hoarded his meager lieutenant's pay and dreamed of war and command. Not for the sake of glory—though he had no objection to a scrap with the Limey or the Frog—but because it would be an opportunity to get rich. Just let me loose on an enemy, he thought, and I'll strangle him with one hand and empty his pockets with the other.

When the Union crumbled, Jase took his time deciding which way to jump. He had no reason to love the Confederacy. The people running the rebellion were his worst nightmare, but on the other hand he hated the Yankees six ways from Sunday. He didn't want to fight his own family: he knew his brothers would join the CSA. Captain Markham finally helped him make up his mind when he offered the first lieutenant's berth on his privateer. Privateers were in business to make money, and money was what Jase wanted to make.

After the privateering cruise he joined the Navy on a ridiculous surge of optimism, thinking he could maybe hitch himself to Markham's star. But Markham wasn't given a command right away, and the Navy Department put Jase to work building a ropewalk in Mobile.

But Captain Markham came through for him. People in Richmond asked him to undertake a certain mission on the Mississippi. Markham said he wasn't the right man for the job, but he knew somebody who was.

Markham wouldn't do anything underhanded or dishonorable, and he was a bad liar. These, Jase figured, were his character flaws.

Jase took the Western & Atlantic east for a meeting with Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin. Benjamin had a bandit's touch with finance and did not share Captain Markham's character flaws. Jase Miller took to him right away.

Jase had some conditions. He wanted to hand-pick his own crew from anyone in the South, in or out of the service. He wanted his back covered in Richmond, particularly with the Secretaries of War and of the Navy.

And he wanted not to be poor when the war was over. In this, he figured, he was just like the leaders of the Rebellion.

Benjamin saw the sense of these requests. He acceded entirely.

"If we recover this specie," he said, "it may alter the course of the war. We'll have gold to bribe the French with, not just cotton. And in any case, we will be able to purchase weapons for our soldiers."

Harry Klee was at loose ends after the *Louisiana* had been scuttled, and Jase took him on as executive officer. The Jackson twins were found on a Charleston blockade runner. Chief Tyrus was brought out of the shipyards in Charleston, where he'd been converting vessels to blockade runners, and the Gunner, Faren Smith, the finest cannoneer and rifleman Jase had ever known, was found amid the wreckage of the River Defense Fleet. Other people were found here and there. None were exactly immune to the lure of profit.

There was money up the Mississippi, Jase Miller told them. There were two Federal fleets in the way, Farragut's salt-water flotilla and Davis's river fleet. So all Jase and his men had to do to make their fortunes was steal the Army's ironclad ram, then defeat the Yankees.

5.
The *Argo* is builded by Jason and Argus

Under Jase's direction, the senator's workmen put together massive gun truck carriages of cypress wood strapped with iron. Carpenters assembled a simulated gun deck on the levee, protected with revetments and cotton bales, where the guns could be pointed out over the Yazoo and crews could be trained while workmen still labored on the ironclad. The battery could also be used to protect *Arcola* in case the Yankees decided to venture up the Yazoo. Crewmen from the *General Bee* came ashore to instruct the ironclad's crew in gunnery.

Since there were no real seamen in *Arcola*'s crew, nobody wondered why the little *Bee,* a tiny vessel in a service strapped for volunteers, was 50 percent over complement. Jase had, like Fortinbras, shark'd up a list of lawless resolutes, and the list was a long one.

The ironclad's crews proved no better than expected. The militia artillerymen that Pendergas had scavenged from his training units knew how to do their jobs well enough, given that they'd trained on little six-pound brass howitzers instead of hulking iron naval guns, but the militiamen hated the blacks like poison. They demonstrated on every possible occasion that they'd rather curse and kick their black fellow crewmen than fight the Yankees. The slaves knew better than to disclose the hatred they doubtless felt for the whites, but they showed no enthusiasm for their task, and little bits of sabotage kept occurring. Friction primers would go missing, the special ammunition for the Brooke rifle would be placed by the wrong gun, handspikes and priming irons would not be ready to hand when they were needed. On one occasion, the guns' wooden tompions were seen floating down the Yazoo. These incidents drove the white gunners into near frenzy.

Senator Pendergas pronounced himself pleased with his gunners' progress. Jase smiled and bided his time.

Jase formed some of the *Bee*'s men into a baseball team, and Navy played Army almost every afternoon following drill. With Faren Smith's pitching, Castor Jackson stealing bases, and Castor's twin, Put-Up-Your-Dukes, and Harry Klee regularly belting the ball into the bayou, the Navy won on a regular basis. Army discontent increased. Jase let it simmer.

Pendergas seemed unaware of the tensions within his command. He busied himself with the grand plans for the conclusion of the war once the president gave him the troops, and with plotting the destruction of Farragut's fleet, which he figured would be the work of an afternoon. On occasion, though, he relaxed to the extent of attending a baseball game.

"Your center fielder," he nodded on one such occasion, "I've been thinking he looks familiar."

Jase took a draw on one of the senator's cigars. "His name is Pedaiah Jackson," he said.

Pendergas gave him a squint-eyed look. "The prizefighter? The one they call Put-Up-Your-Dukes?"

"That's the one."

"I saw him beat Tommy Corcoran down in Orleans in '58. He was a champ, wasn't he?"

"Heavyweight Champion of Great Britain and Ireland," Jase said, "till the law found out about the wives he had stashed all over the kingdom, and he had to take a long sea voyage." On the *USS Constellation,* as it happened, where Jase was serving as third lieutenant.

Pendergas spat tobacco into the grass and ground it in with his shoe. "Interesting crew you've got, Miller."

Jase nodded at the field. "That's Jackson's twin brother, Castor, at shortstop. My quartermaster."

The senator scratched his beard thoughtfully. "There's a prizefighter up in Yazoo City called Tom Amboise. People call him 'King.' A blacksmith. Killed a man in the ring up in Memphis with his bare fists."

"I heard of him," Jase said.

"You reckon Put-Up-Your-Dukes would fight him? Barehanded, of course? I'd put up a good cash prize. We could stage the fight up in Yazoo City, and I could commission a special train from Jackson for all the sportin' gents."

Jase concealed his inward smile. "Talk to Jackson about it. But I don't want him fighting as long as we're working on the *Arcola.* Launch the ram and get the men trained, and then I figure I can release Dukes from duty for a few days."

The senator spat. "Gives me more time for putting up placards and spreading the word." And placing bets, Jase figured.

"Well, then," Jase said. "If Jackson is willing."

Pendergas peered at him. "Is Jackson in training?"

"I've never seen him come close to losing."

Pendergas smiled as he placed mental bets against the local man-killer. Things were coming together pretty well.

6.
With sacrifices to the Gods, *Argo* is launched

Placards for the prize fight started going up on the same day that *Arcola* was launched. The earthen embankment that separated the makeshift drydock from the Yazoo was torn away, and foaming river water spilled into the gap. As slaves worked madly with shovels and barrows, the water climbed the ram's wooden hull to the belt of iron at the waterline. The cradle on which *Arcola* rested gave a series of groans. People cheered. Guns fired a salute. Flags waved. A militia band—boys and elderly men—played "Bonnie Blue Flag." Pendergas, grandly dressed in a soft pearl-grey uniform, waved his forage cap at the crowd.

A gun fired. The Army battle flag, the red square with the blue saltire and white stars, rose on the ram's flagstaff.

Jase, aboard *General Bee,* did not like that flag there, and reckoned he would change it by and by. He ordered ahead slow. The tugboat's bronze screw propeller thrashed brown water. Warps tautened, creaked.

The ram groaned but refused to move from its cradle. The railroad iron was weighing it down. Jase increased *Bee*'s power until there was nothing but white froth under its stern counter. *Arcola* did not move.

Harry Klee beat upon the frame of the pilothouse door with one huge fist. "Those Army dung-throwers! They've stranded *Arcola* in her own dry dock!"

Jase jangled bells to signal engine stop. "We'll get her afloat."

"Hope she's not stuck till the river rises!"

Mule teams were mobilized, harnessed to warps, and lined up on the levees. The ironclad was lightened by the weight of its anchor and chain, its cookstove, a pair of anvils, carpenter's stores, and the contents of the paint locker. Again Jase signaled *Bee*'s engine room ahead slow. Mule drivers cracked whips. Again the flags waved. Again the people cheered. Again Pendergas waved his cap. Again the strains of "Bonnie Blue Flag" were heard.

Again the ironclad failed to move. Pendergas threw his forage cap onto the levee and kicked it into the Yazoo. Jase lit a cigar while Harry Klee cursed and fumed.

"Calm down, Harry," he said. "This is just dandy." Then he went ashore to tell Pendergas he had a plan.

The crowds had gone home by the time *Arcola* was floated. The ironclad's boilers were filled with water. Jase warped a coal barge into the drydock until its bows touched *Arcola*'s flat stern. Just enough coal was shifted into the ram's bunkers to get up steam, then the barge was warped away again. It was the middle of the night before the steam pressure was sufficient to crank the engines, but that wasn't enough for Jase. He had Chief Tyrus tie down the safety valves and ordered more coal thrown into the fireboxes.

The mules were harnessed once more. Harry Klee took position in *Bee*'s wheelhouse. Jase stood in the armored pilot's station atop the front of the ironclad's casemate, Castor Jackson and three others stood at the wheel just below him, and Chief Tyrus attended the engines. The other crew was hustled ashore, and were probably glad to be there. Jase wished he could blow a steam whistle to let everyone know when to start, but *Arcola* lacked that piece of equipment. Maybe a whistle was beneath the dignity of an armored terror such as the ram.

Arcola's pilot house lacked a roof, so Jase just chinned himself up, got one foot onto the casemate, and stood. The day's heat still rose from the railroad iron. He had Castor hand him up a battle lantern, and he waved it at Klee. *Bee,* which had a whistle, promptly gave out with a series of blasts, and over the silent river Jase heard the sound of *General Bee*'s engines begin to thump. Whips cracked. Wood groaned as it took the strain.

Jase looked down into the ram and called to Castor. "Signal astern slow." Castor expertly played the ropes that rang bells in the engine room, and was answered by huge, solid, tooth-rattling crashes as *Arcola*'s engines engaged, then a surge as the twin eight-foot-diameter propellers began to bite water. White water streamed alongside *Arcola*'s flank. Jase felt the ram shudder, heard submerged wood groan.

"Half astern," he ordered. Bells jangled in the engine room. Tongues of flame licked from the twin stacks. The hawsers that connected *General Bee* to *Arcola* were so taut that water shot from the coils as they took the strain. The ram's air intakes, huge metal bells shaped like ear trumpets, began to howl with the force of the gale sucked into the boilers. Wood moaned like a giant in torment. The water in the drydock surged back from the propellers, turned to froth. A shudder ran the length of the ram, and Jase felt the trembling in his bones. Jase saw Pendergas on the edge of the drydock, pacing up and down, shouting at him. He had a feeling that the senator wanted Jase to shut everything down and wait for the Yazoo to rise.

Jase looked left and right, watching the water surge along the ironclad. Gauged his moment.

"Astern full." Spray from the propellers flew twenty feet high, a wave inundating Pendergas in his new uniform. Pendergas kept shouting. A series of bangs like cannon shots sounded through the air. *Arcola* jerked on the ways and Jase almost tumbled down the inclined iron casemate. There was a surge, the bow rose as if to a wave, and *Arcola* leaped like a racehorse from the drydock, scattering behind it the hardwood wedges that had held it in its cradle.

"Engines stop! Helm hard a-port! Hard down!"

Jase had calculated that *Arcola*'s propellers would pull so much water into the drydock that its water would rise several feet above the level of the Yazoo. The rising water, more than the power of the propellers, floated the ram free.

Castor and his mates flung themselves on the wheel's spokes, trying to get the big rudder over before *Arcola* speared itself, stern-first, onto the opposite bank of the Yazoo. Harry Klee had to maneuver nimbly in midstream to avoid being rammed as *Arcola* shot past *General Bee*; he had his own rudder hard over and was steaming upstream at full ahead. *Arcola* had only begun its turn before the hawsers connecting it to *General Bee* cracked taut, and the ram snapped stern-to-current with a jerk that almost sent Jase tumbling. *Arcola* rolled madly for a moment—Jase remembered that she was unballasted, topheavy, and watched in terror as creamy water licked the gunports—but the boat righted itself, and Jase breathed easy.

Steam flew high and white as Chief Tyrus valved the boilers. The rushing steam made so much noise that for a few moments Jase didn't hear the screams and shrieks rising from the Yazoo. He looked in puzzlement at the water, then saw heads breaking surface in foam.

Mules. No provision had been made for untying the mule trains that had helped to run *Arcola* out of its dock. The ram, which probably weighed a thousand tons with the armor on her, had dragged the animals out into the river, helpless as birds in a net. To judge from the cursing that was emanating from the vicinity of the struggling animals, some of the mule handlers had been dragged into the water as well.

Jase gazed in horror at the thrashing men and animals, tangled together in their harness. It was the sailor's worst nightmare: in the water, drowning because you were tangled in your own equipment. *Arcola* was killing them. He shouted to Castor, ran down the casemate to the foredeck, and tried hauling on the lines with his bare hands, but it was useless. Even with

Castor's help, he wasn't strong enough. The river had the men and animals, and there was nothing to be done.

Two men drowned, and twenty-four mules, before *Arcola* was laid alongside the levee. Because the men were free whites, Pendergas would pay compensation for the mules only.

Jase thought of the old pagan days, when the launch of a ship would mean the sacrifice of men and animals, and he wondered if the dark old gods of the Yazoo had just conferred a blessing on the ironclad and its mission.

7.

The Argonauts holdeth games and crowneth the Champions

The day after *Arcola*'s launch, Army and Navy met for their gunnery competition. *Arcola* fired first, the smoothbores pounding away at targets set on rafts in the Yazoo while the Brooke rifle fired at targets on the far bank. Both Jase and Pendergas pretended not to notice when one of the loaders dropped a thirty-two-pound solid onto the bare foot of one of the blacks, or when a fistfight developed among the crew of the ten-inch Dahlgren.

The guns fell silent. Powder smoke slowly dissipated in the still Mississippi air while *Arcola*'s gunners filed out of the battery. *General Bee* chugged onto the Yazoo to replace the targets. Jase looked at his watch.

"Four and a half minutes," he said to Pendergas. "Very creditable." Pendergas spat with pleasure.

Harry Klee led the *Bee*'s gunners into the battery, and Jase almost felt sorry for Pendergas. Every member of *Bee*'s crew was a picked man, though there was no way Pendergas could know that.

The trained Navy gunners loaded so fast they fired two shots to the Army's one. The Dahlgren demolished its target at the first fire, then Klee grabbed a handspike, put it to his massive shoulders, and shoved the huge gun carriage sideways, training it on one of the thirty-two-pounder targets.

Faren Smith's Brooke rifle fired two ranging shots at its distant target across the Yazoo, then blew it to smithereens with the third. By the time it swung inboard to another target, that target was gone, and there was nothing left to shoot at.

Jase clicked his watch shut and called for a cease-fire. "Two minutes fourteen seconds," he said amiably. "No sense wasting powder shooting at floating wreckage."

Pendergas gave him a thoughtful look. "That was . . . impressive, lieutenant."

"My gunners have had more practice. Yours will improve."

The senator said nothing, only spat a meditative quid of tobacco onto the grass.

Pendergas handed Jase his winnings—two hundred silver dollars. "You'll win your money back in the prize fight, and then some," Jase consoled him.

Pendergas then had his bugler call his men to receive their pay. The pay was in Confederate scrip, stuff so badly printed that the ink stuck to the fingers and the bills turned to compost in the soldiers' pockets. Sutlers and merchants would only take scrip at a discount. Jase wondered if the wages that Pendergas was collecting on behalf of his slaves were paid in scrip, or in specie. Jase reckoned the latter.

This was better and better. Jase called for *General Bee*'s pay chest, which Secretary Benjamin had provided, and handed out his own crew's wages—all in silver.

"Be sure to tell your friends in the Army," he admonished his men, "that the Navy pays in silver, because we all get prize money for our captures. Too bad they're not in the Navy, eh?"

Wine maketh merry, he thought, but money answereth all things.

He observed thoughtful expressions on the faces of a great many Army men that day.

8.

Pelias plotteth against Jason

Arcola was ballasted with leftover railroad iron and fifty tons of pig iron brought in barges from Yazoo City. Her guns were hoisted into her, and she began her trials, steaming up and down the Yazoo while her crew accustomed themselves to sweating inside a baking iron box while working alongside enormous, fast, and highly dangerous machinery. Jase was pleased by the speed he could get out of the ram despite all the armor topside. Ten knots, he judged, if he had the current with him.

One night, when *Arcola* had been warped up to the coal barge to fill its bunkers, and Jase had retired to his stateroom on *Bee* to take care of some paperwork, Harry Klee loomed up in the doorway.

"I've just had a drink with the senator," he said.

"Bully," Jase said, his mind on watch and quarter bills.

"That artillery competition opened his eyes, it seems. Pendergas offered me a position as second-in-command of *Arcola,* if I'd bring twenty of our gunners with me. Said there was no use in us being on an ol' tugboat when we could be making heroes of ourselves on an ironclad."

Delight sang in Jase's mind. "I've been underestimating him!" he said. "Here I'm trying to steal his men, and he tries to steal mine!" He looked up at Klee. "What did he offer you?"

"Fifty silver dollars. Ten for anyone I brought with me."

Jase laughed. "Ask for more money," he said.

Klee nodded. "I'll do that."

Jase tipped back his stool and looked at the huge man in the doorway. "How are we faring with stealing *his* boys?"

"Pretty well, I reckon. If you can get Pendergas away from 'em for the length of time it would take to get steam up, I figure most of 'em will follow you. Maybe even the officers."

"All's well, then." Jase stroked his short red stubble. "Now all we need is for Put-Up-Your-Dukes to give the folks a good show."

9.

Polydeukes the Boxer fighteth King Amycus

"Lucky the fight's today," Harry Klee said. "The senator was getting close to my price."

Jase gave a tug to the ring ropes, made sure they were lashed properly to the uprights. "What *is* your price?" he asked.

"I'll let you know," Klee said, "when it's time for you to pay it."

Jase had just come to Yazoo City on the *General Bee,* bringing Senator and Mrs. Pendergas along as passengers, along with some of their friends. Though it was still morning, Jase's guests had put away a cask and a half of whiskey during the course of their little river trip.

Which was fine with Jase Miller. The drunker the better.

The twins had been in Yazoo City for several days, getting the lay of the land, with Faren Smith in charge of keeping them out of trouble. Now they and Jase were checking the ring, making certain that there weren't hidden dangers, a rope that would give way, an upright insecurely mounted, or hidden weapons that "King" Amboise could palm once the fight was under way, and use to smash his opponent's ribs, or gouge him in the clinches.

"Have you seen this Amboise?" Jase asked.

"No aggravation there, guvnor," Put-Up-Your-Dukes judged. "I guess I got a hundred tricks he ain't seen."

"Don't finish it too quick," Jase said. "I want this to last all afternoon."

Since prizefights were illegal, the fight couldn't take place in Yazoo City. Shortly after noon a whistle blew, and the first of the special trains chugged into sight, packed with the sporting crowd brought in from Jackson. Jase looked at the rich planters with their diamond stickpins and silver-headed canes, and he reckoned that he'd never seen so many men out of uniform since the war began. And, since there were silks and jewels everywhere on display, it was difficult to tell the fancy ladies from the respectable women by the scale of their finery alone, except that the ladies refused so much as to look at the strutting town girls.

The planters' women, Jase figured, were practiced at not seeing what their menfolk got up to, their amorous night raids in the slave quarters especially.

Harry Klee appeared with a silver bowl of his special milk punch. Jase offered it to the senator and his lady.

The main fight commenced about an hour later, after some preliminary bouts that featured hayseeds walloping each other till they grew so tired they could barely lift their arms. The crowd was restless by the time the celebrated man-killer was introduced. Amboise barely acknowledged the crowd as he climbed into the ring. He was somewhere else entirely. Somewhere where he could kill people with his bare hands.

Put-Up-Your-Dukes made a more relaxed entrance, grinning, waving in answer to the cheers of the crowd and of *General Bee*'s men. The announcer, shouting through a brass speaking trumpet, introduced various dignitaries in the audience—judge this, colonel that, congressman the other, nothing like the South for titles and phony dignity—and Pendergas rose in his dove-grey uniform to take a bow and wave his cup of milk punch at the crowd.

Then the fight got under way. The man-killer started with a leap, an attempt to get the Englishman into a headlock so that Amboise could smash him repeatedly in the face without danger to himself. Put-Up-Your-Dukes, wise to the trick, slipped away and hammered Amboise in the ribs. The bare fists made meaty thwacks as they struck flesh. Amboise charged. Put-Up-Your-Dukes evaded, slipped the wild punches, counterattacked precisely.

And so it went for the first ten rounds or so, the blacksmith pursuing, the Englishman sideslipping and taking advantage of openings. After that Amboise lost his head of steam, and Dukes counterattacked, jabs and solid rights and hooks to the ribs, punches that chipped away at the blacksmith's wind and strength.

After about the twentieth round Put-Up-Your-Dukes slowed down, as if he, too, had run out of steam. The two fighters stalked around each other, firing occasional punches. Their forearms were blueblack from blocking strikes. Whenever Amboise attacked, Dukes would clinch, leaning into Amboise with all his weight, making the blacksmith support him. There was puzzlement on Amboise's face as he tried to work out what to do. His corner kept shouting at him to attack, attack, keep hitting, but Amboise knew perfectly well that it wasn't working.

Jase understood Amboise's problem better than the blacksmith did. He had never before met a man who wasn't scared of him. Amboise's success as a boxer was based on strength and his man-killer reputation, and Dukes' refusal to be frightened cut one of his legs out from under him right from the start.

Amboise spent the interval after the thirty-seventh round vomiting. And the thirty-ninth. But afterward he stepped back into the ring, fists high. You couldn't say he lacked courage.

The sight of Amboise heaving didn't seem to diminish the senator's thirst. When the bowl of milk punch ran low, Jase had it carried away so that it could be refilled. Harry Klee made it himself, with rum, whisky, cinnamon, nutmeg.

"This is the first time you've seen Put-Up-Your-Dukes, isn't it?"

"Yep," Klee nodded.

Jase took from his pocket a brown bottle labeled *Tincture of Opium* and emptied its contents into the punch bowl. He watched as Klee stirred the mixture. "Do you think you could beat our boy? You must outweigh him by fifty pounds."

Harry Klee stroked his black beard. "I could beat him, maybe," he concluded, "but only by killing him."

"Let's hope Amboise doesn't think the same thing," he said.

The audience was growing restless when Jase returned and handed the senator a cup of the new batch. "Compliments of Ensign Klee, sir," he said.

The senator looked impatient. "Can't you get them to give us a show?" he said. "They've been dancing a damn quadrille for the last hour. The onliest entertainment we've seen has been Amboise upchucking his guts."

"I'll see what I can do, General."

He conveyed the senator's request to Castor, and Put-Up-Your-Dukes shifted to the attack, flailing away with wild flurries. The cheering crowd probably didn't notice that few of the punches landed, or that those that did thudded into the blacksmith's ribs, keeping him short of wind and strength.

During the sixty-first round Amboise shot a wild left into the Briton's onslaught, and Dukes staggered. The crowd roared. Amboise followed up, steam-driver punches sending Put-Up-Your-Dukes into the ropes. For a moment Jase's heart stopped—he had too much money on this fight, damn it!—but then Dukes managed to slip under one of the blacksmith's punches and escaped into the ring, where he spent the rest of the round retreating while the crowd hollered for his blood.

"He broke my jaw, sir," Dukes said as he rested between rounds. His voice was a bit thick, but otherwise unaffected by his injury.

"Finish him off, then," Jase said.

"That should take another ten rounds or so," Castor judged.

It was a long process, since in a bareknuckle fight Dukes couldn't go straight for the knockout without risk of breaking his hands; he had to keep cutting away at the man's strength, taking him to pieces bit by bit.

And it took longer than ten rounds to wear away the murderous light in the blacksmith's eyes. The fight had gone into its eighty-fourth round when the exhausted Amboise dropped his guard enough to let Put-Up-Your-Dukes drive a punch straight into his throat. Amboise gagged and bent over, clutching his windpipe. Dukes volleyed a half-dozen unanswered punches to his head, then hammered him in the temple with one solid fist. There was a crack like a wooden mallet banging home a fid. Amboise dropped like a sack of beets. He convulsed, ugly little twitches running over his body. His supporters stormed the ring and carried him away before the referee finished counting him out.

Whether the cause was the punch to the throat, the fist to the temple, or the quality of the medical care—the ring doctor had passed out from drink about the fortieth round—the word soon passed through the crowd that Amboise was dead. Which didn't stop the band from playing "Dixie," or Jase and the senator from collecting their winnings.

The senator's pupils were wide as platters when he returned to the grandstand with his winnings to find his wife was sound asleep, slumped in her finery. From her throat issued delicate, ladylike snores.

"Maybe you should get a hotel room tonight," Jase suggested. "We can return to Long Shanks in the morning."

The senator considered. The opiate hadn't affected him at all, other than to increase his air of jollification. "Bound to be some parties in Yazoo City tonight." He jingled the gold and silver in his pocket. "And it's not me who will be paying."

"I'm going to get Put-Up-Your-Dukes out of sight," Jase said, "before somebody thinks to arrest him for killing that boy."

"They won't serve a warrant on a Navy ship," Pendergas said.

Jase nodded. "Then I know where to hide him."

He needn't have drugged the punch after all, he thought. The possibility of a murder warrant was enough excuse to get everyone aboard the *Bee* and head down the Yazoo.

Amboise had become another sacrifice to Jase's success.

10.

Jason taketh the *Argo* to sea

It was two in the morning when *General Bee* pulled up to Long Shanks Landing. Jase was surprised to see the levee alight with torches and lanterns, and the ironclad abuzz with activity.

"We got a wire, sir. Yankees coming up the river," said the man Pendergas had left in charge, the artillery officer known as Euphemism. "Two Eads ironclads, *Clasher* and *General Stone*, and a double-ended gunboat."

Sudden fire blazed through Jase's veins. "Have you got steam up?" he demanded.

"Steam's down, sir."

"*Well get it up, you fool!*" If the Yankee squadron caught *Arcola* tied to the bank and unable to move, Jase and his crew might as wel be in Paris for all the good they'd do.

The army lieutenant's eyes widened, and he turned to give the order, then hesitated. "Where's General Pendergas, sir?" he asked.

"In Yazoo City! Now get that steam up!" He turned to Harry Klee. "You'll take command of the *Bee*. Get that torpedo ready."

Klee grinned. "Lovely, Captain. Couldn't have worked out better."

Most of *General Bee*'s crew poured off the tugboat to help ready *Arcola* for combat. Jase had a pair of coal barges warped alongside *Arcola* on the river side so that the Yank boats couldn't ram her while she was helpless against the bank. Harry Klee took the *Bee* down river on a reconnaissance.

Jase brought order to the *Arcola*, had the gunners standing by their pieces, the guns loaded and run out the ports while the stokers worked like fury to raise steam. When one of Pendergas's officers volunteered to ride to the telegraph office and send the senator a wire, Jase cursed him, called him a coward, and ordered him back to his post.

The last thing he wanted was for Pendergas to show up on a chartered boat just in time to make himself a hero.

At five in the morning Chief Tyrus reported that *Arcola* had a full head of steam. The National squadron hadn't turned up. *Bee* returned at dawn without having scented any Yanks. Jase sent the crew to breakfast by watches and had a chat with Harry Klee.

"How's Put-Up-Your-Dukes?" he asked.

"Not talking much," Klee said, "but I reckon he's all right." He spat. "You think those Yankee boats even exist?"

Jase stroked his unshaven jaw as he gave the matter his consideration. "That wire was pretty specific, down to the names of the Eads boats," he said. "We've got to assume that the Yanks have a squadron up the Yazoo somewhere. What with all the boasting our papers have been doing about this ram, it may be that Farragut or Flag Officer Davis decided to see what all the boasting is all about."

"Lucky they didn't send the whole fleet." Klee cocked an eye at the starboard watch, eating breakfast in the senator's cotton field while the port watch stood by the guns. "You planning on reading 'em your commission?" he asked.

Jase slapped an insect. "They'll like the news a sight better if we sink some Yankee ironclads first," he said.

"You reckon they'll follow you?"

"I don't plan on giving 'em any choice, Harry."

After breakfast he had both crews mustered on the levee. Jase and Harry Klee climbed the sloping red side of the ram, turned to face the men he wanted to lead down the Yazoo. The whites stood in ranks, most of them in uniform. The slaves slumped behind, silent and resentful.

"I'm not a politician," he told them. "I'm a Navy man, and I don't give speeches."

"Rude am I in my speech," he thought to himself with amusement, "And little bless'd with the soft phrase of peace." Father, your Shakespeare is more useful than you knew.

"There are two Yankee ironclads on the Yazoo!" Jase said. "They've heard we're up here, and they're looking for us. If they find us now, with *Arcola* tied to the bank, we'll be trapped like rats in a hole." He gestured down the river, a clenched fist. "If we go to find *them*, the fight will be even!" He raised his voice. "That's all the South has ever asked. A fair chance! An even fight! Am I right, boys?"

There was a cheer. Jase observed Tyrus and Faren Smith among the *Bee*'s men, keeping the cheer going longer than might otherwise have been the case.

Jase grinned and threw out his chest. Give 'em a little Harry Fifth, he thought. "I don't want anyone on board *Arcola* who isn't ready to get himself a bellyful of Yankees!" he said. "I don't want anyone with me just because he's *ordered* to be there. And that includes *servants!*"

"You in the back!" he said, craning over the ranked white faces on the levee. "The Confederacy thanks you for your contribution, but you will not be required for the coming battle. You are dismissed!"

The blacks moved away, casting glances of hate or contempt over their shoulders, while the white crewmen cheered. They didn't need any prompting this time. Some of them even threw dirt clods after the retreating slaves.

Jase felt a moment of quiet triumph. If he had to build morale by uniting white against black, or black against white, or for that matter by getting them all to whip a cringing cur dog, then that's what he'd do.

"And as for the rest of you—" He took off his straw hat and waved it at the hatchway. "Any man of you who wants a scrap with the Yank, take your *stations!*"

The crewmen cheered again as they poured onto the ironclad. Harry Klee had the watch and quarter bills ready—the *new* watch and quarter bills, the ones that distributed two-thirds of *General Bee*'s complement over the ram, and put them in charge of all *Arcola*'s departments.

"Raise the flag, sir?" Harry Klee asked.

"Ay," Jase said. "And let's make it the naval ensign, shall we?"

Klee got an ensign from the *Bee,* the rectangular flag with its white and red stripes, the blue canton with the circle of stars, and sent it up *Arcola*'s flagstaff. Jase saluted the ensign as it rose, and felt a thrill rocket up his spine. His flag. His boat. His command.

It would take more than Pendergas to take it away from him. And more than a Yankee flotilla, too.

He was about to enter the boat when he saw Lieutenant Euphemism hovering uncertainly by the hatch. He approached, happy to see the lieutenant salute him.

"Yes, lieutenant?" Jase said. "Do you have a question?"

"To tell you the truth, lieutenant—captain—lieutenant—I have been superceded in command of the starboard battery by one of your men."

"You are not superceded," Jase said. "You hold the same post you always did. But I did put someone more experienced over you."

"I'm not certain you have the authority to do such a thing." Euphemism's eyes rose to the flagstaff. "I do not believe I would feel comfortable serving aboard a Navy boat. Perhaps I will ride to the station and wire General Pendergas."

"You'll miss the fight."

"I'm not sure it's my fight, sir, properly speaking."

Jase gave the young man a thoughtful nod. "As you choose. I want only volunteers for this mission."

The lieutenant touched his cap brim. "Much obliged, sir."

"But you should know, lieutenant, that if you wire the senator, there may be unfortunate consequences."

The lieutenant smiled. "For you, sir?"

Jase laughed, to the lieutenant's surprise. "Lord, no," he said. "What I meant is that if you miss this fight, you should ask for a transfer out of this department. Because you'll never be able to walk aboard *Arcola* again and hold your head up."

The lieutenant stared, then swallowed, hard. Jase stepped back from the hatchway, gestured for the man to enter. "Come along, sir," he said. "You can wire the senator from Vicksburg as well as anywhere."

Euphemism pondered for a moment, then smiled, touched his cap again, and entered the ram.

Let the senator stay away for the next fifteen minutes, Jase thought, and the ram is mine.

11.

The Argonauts faceth the peril of the Clashing Rocks

Black smoke poured from *Arcola*'s twin stacks as the ram thrust down the Yazoo. The foredeck before the casemate was almost awash with brown water. Jase sat on the edge of the roofless pilot house, his seaman's soul thrilling to the glory of it all.

"Who is she that looketh forth as the morning sun," he thought, "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?"

Arcola. His *Arcola*.

Oh, *Arcola* was a sweet boat! Fast despite her size and weight, trim, born for the water. Engines tuned to a fare-thee-well, and if she was a little hesitant to answer the big rudder, well, that was just because all the iron gave her momentum. It was a flaw for which a commander sensitive to her ways could compensate, and Jase had learned her well in her trials.

He was so taken with *Arcola* that he had to forcefully remind himself, now and again, that this was all about money.

Sitting next to Jase was the Gunner, Faren Smith, who held an English-made Armstrong target rifle casually across his knees—even as Nimrod the mighty hunter before the Lord, Jase thought.

Jase glanced over his shoulder and saw *General Bee* following two cables lengths behind. *Bee* towed a pair of coal barges that would be cut adrift on the appearance of any Nationals. Above *Bee*'s foredeck towered a pair of wooden sheers that supported a forty-foot boom with a homemade tin canister on the end, Harry Klee's spar torpedo. Behind the foredeck gun stood Put-Up-Your-Dukes, a handkerchief slung beneath his broken jaw and tied over his head. It would be the big prizefighter's job to place the canister under an enemy hull, then touch off the fifty pounds of black powder in the tin bucket.

The thing that most worried Jase was that he and Klee would be unable to communicate with one another once the fight started. Each would have to remember his part in the plan. But there were several plans depending on different contingencies, and it was more than possible to confuse one with the other, and of course, there came a time in any fight when the plan went straight to hell. . . .

"Smoke downriver, boss," Faren Smith said. Jase turned abruptly, scanned the river ahead, saw nothing.

"To the right, above the trees."

Jase corrected his gaze, saw the black smudge billowing above a tangle of cypress. Coal smoke, all right. A lot of smoke, which meant more than one boat.

Jase felt his heart shift to a higher rate of speed, like an engine with the throttles opened. He turned again, waved at the tugboat following behind, pointed to the smoke rising over the cypress. He saw Harry Klee wave back from the pilothouse, then saw a plume of steam rise as Klee blew the whistle twice, the sound unheard over the throb of *Arcola*'s engines.

Jase dropped through the pilot house to the main deck, where Castor stood by the wheel. The inside of the ironclad was hot as a blacksmith's forge, and the clank and hiss of the engines hammered on the ears. "Captain on deck!" someone yelled. The crew shuffled into a state of attention. They'd been at quarters since leaving Long Shanks, the boat cleared for action, guns loaded but not run out the ports.

"Yankees around the bend!" Jase shouted. "Run out the broadside guns!"

Guarding against abrasions with their leather waist protectors, the crewmen threw their weight onto the gun tackles, their bodies leaning almost to the deck as they hauled the heavy iron thirty-two-pounders to the ports. Jase walked swiftly aft, to the hatchway, then dived down the companion to the engine room.

Gleaming piston rods slammed back and forth in the red light of the furnace. The monster cranks of the shafts flung themselves up, then down into their wells, a terrible lunging movement that could crush a man as easily as a boot could squash a beetle. Stokers stood stripped to the waist and leaned on their shovels, sweat making pale tracks in their coats of coal dust.

"Yankees!" Jase shouted to Chief Tyrus. "Stand by to ram!"

Tyrus nodded. Jase ran back up the companion, traveled the length of the gun deck. Forward of the wheel he saw daylight gleaming on the big Dahlgren pivot gun. The iron shutters that closed its three hatches were open on account of the heat. He paused next to Castor, ordered, "Close those shutters forrard." No sense in letting a lucky Yankee shot fly in and drive the length of the boat.

Then he jumped up into the pilothouse again. Faren Smith still sat on the edge of the hatch, legs dangling, rifle across his knees. "I want you to aim the first shot from the Dahlgren," Jase told him. "After that, you can come up here and use that Whitworth."

"Ay, sir." Smith swung down, made his way to the gun deck.

Jase looked over his shoulder, saw the *Bee* following, its men at quarters, the spar torpedo poised high in the air.

He hoped the torpedo wasn't a dud. They were tricky things.

He looked forward, gauged the approaching boats by their smoke. "Steer a point to port," he told Castor. Take the turn wide, he thought. Let's not risk running aground on that point, not now.

The point neared. Jase felt sweat trickling down the back of his neck.

"Full speed!" he shouted down to Castor. "Hard a-starboard!"

Castor already had his hand on the bell line to the engine room. He signaled madly, then threw himself onto the wheel along with his three quartermaster's mates. There was a moment's hesitation as the rudder bit, and then the ram heeled into the turn, white water creaming along its side.

The point fell astern, with its tangle of cypress and flock of roosting cormorants, and a new vista opened up. Jase felt a rocket of pure terror fly up his spine as, a bare three-quarters of a mile away, he saw the Federal squadron.

He had known the Eads ironclads were big, but these were the size of *islands,* islands forged of iron and studded over with batteries of artillery. The Northern engineer James Eads had started with the flat-bottomed hulls of big Mississippi steamers, then plated them over with a slab-sided iron casemate sloped at forty-five degrees. A conical pilot house perched atop the casemate forward, and behind the twin stacks reared a tall pair of humps, the armored housing for the twin paddle wheels.

But what made the Eads boats dangerous was their firepower. Where the *Arcola* had a single gun firing forward, *Clasher* and *General Stone* had four. Where *Arcola* had three guns on the broadside, the Yankee boats had five. And where *Arcola* had a single gun firing astern, the Eads ironclads carried two.

Arcola's advantages were its speed, its ram, and the greater thickness of Argus McBride's ingenious armor. As Jase stared through the steel pilothouse bars at the Yankee flotilla, they seemed scant advantage enough.

If it goes badly, he consoled himself, he could run away. With its twin screws, *Arcola* was faster than these big paddle boats.

And at least the Yankees were moving up the Yazoo one at a time, not as Jase had feared in line abreast, presenting Jase with an iron wall. The boat in the lead, judging by the gilt-trimmed letters that scrolled out on a graceful wrought-iron arch between the stacks, was the *Clasher*. The *Stone* followed. If the double-ended gunboat was present, it was behind the *Stone,* and Jase could not see her.

"Wheel amidships," he called down. "Stand by the bow gun."

Arcola lurched and shuddered as Chief Tyrus fed more steam to the engines. Jase could see Castor fighting the wheel as the power came unevenly to the screws.

"Port your helm. Meet her. Hold her so."

Jase aimed *Arcola* right for *Clasher*'s bows, as if intending a head-on collision. The impact would probably be suicidal for both boats, but if he could panic *Clasher*'s helmsman into turning, then he would be able to ram the Yank broadside and sink her.

Jase ducked beneath the hatch coaming, shouted along the gun deck.

"Stand by your guns!" he shouted. "You're going to have all the time you need to aim, so make each shot count."

There was a sudden bang, and Jase straightened just as a solid iron shot shrieked right overhead, a sound that made him duck again. *Clasher* had fired one of its bow guns. Jase's heart hammered. This was all happening very fast.

Another gun went off, and for a moment Jase was staring right at an advancing iron ball that seemed aimed right between his eyes. Terror sang along Jase's nerves. But the shot dropped at the last instant, and then Jase felt the impact, heard iron clang and timbers groan. Sparks flew, and then Jase saw the forty-two-pound solid shot shooting straight up into the sky as it bounded off *Arcola*'s slanting casemate.

Another bang, then a series of splashes to port as a clean miss skipped along the surface of the Yazoo. And then another impact, another screech of iron, as *Arcola*'s armor absorbed the last round of *Clasher*'s forward battery.

"Run out the forward gun! Fire at will!"

The forward iron shutter was thrown open with a clang, then trunnions rumbled on the deck as the ten-inch Dahlgren was hauled out the port. Jase stared at the oncoming bow wave as *Clasher*'s massive prow shouldered aside the brown river water. The Yankee was not turning. That damned Eads boat had to be at least fifty feet wide.

Lord, Jase thought, they were coming together fast. Let him not mistime this. Shoot, shoot, shoot *now,* he mentally urged Faren Smith.

Too late. He ducked below the coaming to shout at Castor.

"Port your helm! Signal the engine room for half ahead! Ready the port broadside!"

Just then the bow gun went off, its roar hammering Jase's ears in the confined space of the casemate. There was an almost immediate clang as *Clasher*'s armor received the ten-inch ball. Jase straightened and looked forward just as the rudder began to bite, the planking tilting under his feet, the boat slowing as the big rudder acted as a brake. As the gunsmoke cleared he saw a dimple on *Clasher*'s casemate iron where the Dahlgren had struck. There was no other effect.

That huge prow seemed only *yards* away. Jase's mouth went dry. If he had mistimed, it would be the *Clasher* that rammed *Arcola,* not the other way around.

"Helm to starboard!" Jase shouted. Castor flung the wheel the other way, throwing his weight on the spokes. The blunt Yankee prow creamed closer. *Arcola* shuddered as the rudder bit and slewed to the left.

"Brace for collision!" Jase yelled. He'd mistimed, damn it.

There was an impact, then a sound of rending timbers as *Arcola*'s port bow struck the port bow of *Clasher*. Jase clung to the bars of the pilot house as the collision tried to take him off his feet. Timbers shrieked as *Arcola* scraped along *Clasher*'s port side, the huge Eads boat shouldering the ram aside as if it were a piece of driftwood. A laugh forced its way past Jase's throat. He hadn't managed to kill his boat on the Yankee's prow after all.

"Port battery!" he shrieked with relief. "Fire as you bear!"

And then Faren Smith hopped up beside him, the Armstrong rifle in his hands. "Shoot the helmsman, sir?" he offered.

"If you like," Jase said, but his words were drowned by the storming of the broadside guns, *Clasher* and *Arcola* firing at such close range that the muzzles almost touched. Flame and smoke shot up between the iron casemates, and the clang of iron sounded like anvils ringing beneath the hammers of giants. Splinters flew through the air as *Arcola*'s longboat was demolished. Crewmen of both vessels cheered. Smith aimed and fired his rifle in the din, and Jase didn't even hear him.

"Missed, sir," he reported, and began to reload.

Jase peered through gunsmoke. "Starboard a point. Meet her. Run the Dahlgren out the port side."

That would put *Arcola* on a slightly diverging course. He wanted to get as close to the starboard bank as possible so that he would have room to turn the ram around.

The second Eads boat, *General Stone,* was hidden behind *Clasher* and had very possibly not even known what was going on until the first shot was fired. *Stone* followed *Clasher* at two cables' distance. A canvas awning was spread over the flat roof of *Stone*'s casemate, and bulwarks of sandbags and timber had been constructed beneath the awning. Jase saw people running along the top of the casemate, arms glittering, and realized that *Stone* carried a company of infantry on its roof, probably with the intention of using them to burn a few plantations or gins while they passed through the interior of Mississippi.

Two cables behind the *Stone* came the double-ender gunboat. Pointed at each end, with rudders fore and aft and a pair of paddle wheels right amidships, the gunboat could go as fast astern as forward. Though it was ideal for reconnaissance missions up creeks and bayous, in a battle between ironclads it was outclassed.

He heard the clang of iron shutters and the rumble of trunnions as the reloaded port battery began to roll out the ports.

"At the second boat," he called, "fire as you bear."

The Dahlgren's mighty boom concussed the water with its fury. Its iron shutter slammed shut as the huge smoothbore recoiled into the casemate. From *Stone* came a clang, and Jase saw infantrymen dive for cover as the ten-inch ball struck the Yankee's slanted armor and bounded over their heads in a trail of sparks.

"Look at the *Bee,* sir!" Faren Smith called in delight. "Look at her take on that big Yankee!"

Jase turned to see the *General Bee,* flame shooting from her stacks, firing her guns as she ran along the side of the *Clasher.* The Eads ironclad hadn't reloaded its broadside yet and wasn't able to reply. Jase saw the spar torpedo dip, saw Put-Up-Your-Dukes and another crewman wrestling with the ungainly butt-end of the spar. And then the torpedo splashed white as it hit the Yazoo, and the force of the water immediately wrenched it from the prizefighter's hands as it slewed under the *Clasher*'s hull.

"My God," Jase said, knowing what was about to happen. He saw the boxer's arm jerk the lanyard, and then the river rose beneath the Yankee boat as the fifty pounds of gunpowder went off beneath its flat bottom.

Water splashed *out* the gunports, he saw, blasted up right through *Clasher*'s bottom. The sound echoed off the trees. The explosion heeled *Bee* far over to starboard, and for a moment Jase's heart stopped as the tugboat was poised on the edge of a capsize. But then *Bee* righted itself, and the *Clasher*'s gunports filled with struggling figures as nearly two hundred crewmen tried to abandon ship at the same instant. Boilers began to thunder as river water found the fires. Steam gushed from every port. The two tall stacks toppled into the river.

There was nothing to keep the *Clasher* afloat. It was made of iron, and it sank fast. In a few brief seconds, all that was left on the surface was foam and struggling figures.

Then *Arcola* and *General Stone* began to exchange broadsides, and the river filled with the sound of iron hammering iron. The infantry on *Stone*'s casemate lowered their muskets and began to fire by platoon volleys, and Jase winced as musket balls whined off the pilot house. Faren Smith waited for the shooting to die down, then popped above the pilot house, leveled his rifle, and fired.

"Got an officer, sir," he said conversationally. "Only infantry, though."

The double-ender's bow gun fired, and the shot screamed overhead. There was a crash as it landed in trees. Jase glanced at the river bank to starboard, the cypress standing in the brown water. Gauged his motion. Felt sweat trickle down his nose. He tried to remember that the boat hesitated when the helm was put down hard, that she didn't answer the wheel directly.

"Hard a-port!" he called. "Engines ahead full. Run the Dahlgren out forrard. Starboard battery, stand by to fire at the gunboat."

Arcola heeled as the rudder bit water. *General Bee* maneuvered sharply to avoid collision as the ram crossed its bows. The starboard battery lashed out at the double-ender, but Jase's eyes were on the *Stone.*

"Rudder amidships. Steady as she goes."

Jase jerked around at the sound of a bang aft, afraid he'd been hit, but then he saw the plume of gunsmoke and realized that the Brooke rifle, trained aft, had fired as it bore on the double-ender. *Bee,* having crossed *Arcola*'s wake, was aimed for the double-ender as well. Its bow gun barked out, and Jase saw splinters fly from the Yankee boat.

Jase returned his attention to the *Stone.* The Yankee's stern guns rolled out the ports as the Confederate ram fell into her wake, and both fired at almost the same instant. One hissing shot punched a hole in *Arcola*'s starboard funnel. The other missed. *Arcola*'s ten-inch Dahlgren fired in reply, and as the shot struck home Jase was pleased to hear the crack of broken iron plate.

The Yankee's rear armor wasn't as thick as that in front. If he could keep on the *Stone*'s vulnerable tail, the huge Dahlgren was going to break down the enemy's defenses.

Cannon boomed as *General Bee* engaged the double-ender. Jase ignored it: Harry Klee was on his own.

Arcola's big bronze screws bit the water. Her speed grew. *General Stone* loomed closer, a gun-studded wall of iron.

"Brace for ramming!" Jase called.

Arcola smashed into *Stone*'s stern with a sound like thunder, the ram's iron-plated beak punching through timber. Jase didn't think he could sink *General Stone* this way, but hoped he could disable the Yankee's rudder. If *Stone* lost its rudder, it might slew broadside-to-current and Jase could ram it broadside.

Iron shutters parted with a clang, and *Stone*'s aft battery began to run out. "Engines half ahead," Jase called. The boats drew apart as *Stone*'s guns fired. Jase felt *Arcola* shudder, heard oaken timbers crack. *Arcola*'s bow gun blasted out again. Again there was that satisfying smash as the ten-inch solid struck home.

Faren Smith's Whitworth cracked. "Another officer," he reported, but then musket balls began to whine around the pilot house as the infantry atop the enemy leveled their weapons and began to fire. Jase hunched low, peering through the lowest slit at the looming enemy. He was acutely aware that he and Smith were the only targets a whole company of infantry could find to shoot at.

"Engines ahead full!"

Jase rammed again, jolting the *Stone* with another smashing blow from behind. A swarm of musket balls pelted the pilot house. Jase wondered if he should order the Dahlgren loaded with grapeshot and blow those footsoldiers off their perch, but decided his best chance for ending the fight was to keep hammering at *Stone*'s vulnerable stern.

This went on for at least fifteen minutes. *General Stone* plodded upriver, with *Arcola* pursuing, ramming her stern whenever the opportunity presented itself. *Stone* was going to have to do *something*: she was running in the wrong direction, deeper into enemy-held Mississippi, and the Confederate ram lay between the Yank and its base. But if *Stone* tried to turn around, *Arcola* would ram her broadside and put her on the bottom of the Yazoo.

"Sir! Sir!" Jase looked in surprise to see a powder-streaked Army lieutenant, the man called Euphemism. "That last shot knocked away the flagstaff!" Euphemism shouted. "Our flag's lying on the casemate where I can't reach it through the gunport!"

Jase winced as a musket ball whined through one of the pilot house slits, ricocheted off iron, then buried itself in the oaken coaming. "Very good, lieutenant," he said, unable to think of a remark more suitable to the occasion.

"Sir!" Euphemism sounded desperate. "It's not good at all! We're not flying a flag! The Yankees could think we're trying to surrender!"

Jase looked at Smith. Smith shrugged. "Let 'em," Jase said.

"No!" Euphemism shouted. "We've got to keep the flag flying!"

Jase watched in surprise as Euphemism chinned himself up to the open hatch atop, then sprang onto the casemate and ran aft. He picked up the remains of the flagstaff and stood straddling the casemate's spine, waving the flag like fury and shouting defiance at the Yanks.

"And the Navy flag, too," Jase said.

"Well," Faren Smith said, as surprised as Jase, "at least it gives the infantry someone else to shoot at."

And indeed the infantry seemed happy to devote their attention to Euphemism. He stood amid the bullets' hail as he shouted and waved his flag and his fist. The Yanks' efforts, however, did not seem blessed by any great accuracy. Though they shot off his cap, and at one point knocked him down, he just got back to his feet and yelled at them to try harder.

Finally the Dahlgren smoothbore did its work: the big gun boomed, and the thunderous concussion was followed by a crack, then a rapid series of clangs. The ten-inch solid shot had penetrated *Stone*'s rear armor, traveled the length of the boat, then began bounding inside like a mad thing, upending guns, taking off arms and heads like the devil's own executioner. Once the boat's iron armor had been penetrated, the same armor that protected the ship from attack would not let the shot *out:* it bounced around inside, like a seed shaken in a gourd, until it got tired.

"Three cheers!" Jase shouted. "We've raked her!"

The third cheer rang out just as *Stone* began a lumbering turn. The raking shot had convinced the skipper he had to try something before the Dahlgren gutted his boat.

"Starboard your helm!" Jase called. "Ring for full ahead."

Arcola's ram caught the *Stone* dead amidships. There was the crash of timbers, the scream of tortured oak. "Engines half astern," Jase called. He suspected he hadn't gained quite enough momentum to do mortal damage. He backed *Arcola* for a cable's length while the *Stone*'s paddle wheels thrashed white water in an effort to get the big boat around, and then Jase ordered full ahead and speared *General Stone* on the iron-sheathed ram.

There was a colossal wrench, a rending of timbers, a crash of machinery. Jase felt *Arcola* pitch forward, heard the gurgle of water as it crept up the casement. "Astern full!" he shouted. *General Stone* was filling with water and would drag *Arcola* to the bottom unless Jase could get the ram out of the enemy boat.

The ram's engines shuddered to a stop, then reversed with a hiss of steam. Jase felt his boat tilt downward. He could hear the gurgle and suck of water. He had to get the boat reversed before her screws pitched up out of the water. *Stone*'s broadside guns roared, hammering Rebel iron. The big bronze screws turned the water white under *Arcola*'s stern. Then, with a moan of broken timber, the ram pulled free. Water gushed into the enemy boat, and her crew began to pour out her hatches.

"Port your helm! All stop!"

Silence fell on the torpid river, and then Jase heard the distant sound of two shots. *General Bee*'s action with the double-ender was proceeding, out of sight, downstream.

And then *Arcola*'s crew began to cheer. Jase leaned wearily against the side of the pilot house and grinned at Faren Smith.

"Well," he thought, "the boat is mine now, whatever anyone else might think."

12.

King Lycus welcometh the Argonauts to the city

Accompanied by *General Bee, Arcola* pulled up to the levee below the fortress city of Vicksburg, protected by the hundred heavy guns on the city's red clay bluffs. *Arcola* sported a new flagstaff, jury-rigged by Euphemism, on which flaunted the bullet-torn Navy flag. *Bee* had reclaimed its coal barges, on which slouched about a hundred soggy Yankees picked up off the river. The rest of the Federals had got ashore and were wandering in the swamps of the Yazoo, where they would eventually be rounded up, no doubt, by the militia.

Harry Klee had won his running fight with the Yankee double-ender by putting an explosive shell into one of its paddleboxes. With one paddle wrecked, the gunboat had veered straight into the bank, where her crew had set her afire. The double-ender blew up when the fires reached its magazine, and its crew had joined the scattered refugees on the shore.

Bee was somewhat the worse for wear. Its stack was riddled and leaking, and its superstructure had been hit by enemy shot that had punched clean through the wood-sided tug, though without harming either its crew or its machinery. The Yanks' accuracy had put Klee in a temper, which he relieved by cursing at the prisoners as they were marched to the city under guard.

Jase sent Put-Up-Your-Dukes to the telegraph office to send a wire to Richmond announcing the victory, then mustered the two crews on the levee, lit a cigar, and called for *Arcola*'s pay chest. But first, he took from his chest two letters he had been saving, each from Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory.

The first letter commissioned *Arcola* as a vessel in the Confederate Navy. The second placed Jase in command of her, and assigned him and *Arcola* to special duty on the Mississippi, as described in sealed orders to be opened later at the captain's discretion. Jase read the letters aloud to the assembled crewmen, then smiled and drew on his cigar as Faren Smith and Castor led the cheers.

"There," he thought, "let Pendergas try to get me out of the boat now."

He saw the Army crewmen exchanging uncertain glances, and saw the uncertainty increase as he ordered the muster rolls produced and the pay chest opened.

"In the Navy," he said, "we are entitled to head money for the crews of the Yankee boats we sank this morning. I have every expectation that Congress may award prize money as well. I intend to pay all Navy men their share, in advance, in silver. Unfortunately I can't do this for you Army boys . . ." He smiled. "Unless, of course, you choose to enlist in the Navy and remain with

Arcola. Ensign Klee—" pointing with his cigar at Klee, "—will be happy to put you on our muster rolls. Now—" He cleared his throat and tried to look serious. "Some of you may wonder whether you can serve simultaneously in the Army and Navy. My own guess is that people like us need not worry about it, that these are matters for people in Richmond to fuss over. What I *do* know is that if you put your name on the dotted line yonder, you can receive your head money in silver. Anyone for the Navy—" He took off his straw boater and flourished it in Klee's direction. "Form up before Mr. Klee!"

A cheer rose as the Army men broke ranks. Jase watched them and savored his cigar. He became aware that Euphemism was limping toward him.

"You're not wounded, I hope?" Jase said.

"A few scratches," Euphemism said, and patted at some tears in his uniform jacket. "The Yankees shot the heel off my boot."

"That's a brave thing you did, sir," Jase said. "I won't venture to speak to its wisdom."

"Wise or not, it was necessary," Euphemism said briefly, and Jase wondered if it was necessary to the Cause, to the laws of war, or to Euphemism, a proof of his own courage under fire. The Army man held out his hand. "I wonder if I might see your orders, sir?"

Jase handed over the two letters from Secretary Mallory. Euphemism read them with a polite frown. "These appear to be perfectly genuine," he said. "But I observe that these are dated nearly a month ago."

"That is correct."

Euphemism looked up at Jase from beneath the brim of his cap. He stroked his mustache thoughtfully. "This usurpation of yours appears to have been planned in high places, sir."

Jase found himself in an expansive mood. "Let us say, Lieutenant, that you, I, and Richmond alike meditated on the capacities of General Pendergas, and came to identical conclusions. And furthermore, there is a mission to which Richmond has assigned us, and for which I and my men have been hand picked."

"And your orders?"

"Sealed," Jase said. "I cannot open them at present. But the mission is vital to the Confederacy, and will be profitable for all concerned."

Euphemism frowned. "I would not have it said that I joined the Cause for mercenary motives, Captain Miller."

"I'm sure not. But naval custom permits reasonable profit in reward for hazard."

"But I am not in the Navy, sir."

Jase inclined his head toward the line that had formed before Harry Klee. "We can rectify that, Mr. Euphemism. We would enlist you as an ensign—that is the naval equivalent of your present Army rank—with your commission dating from this morning, before the fight on the Yazoo. Your position on *Arcola* will remain unchanged."

"I'm flattered, Captain." Euphemism tilted his head, affected to consider the offer. "I'm afraid not, sir," he said. "I fear I can serve a single master only."

"As you wish," Jase said. "But I hope you will remain on *Arcola.*" The crew, Jase suspected, would admire Euphemism for his bravery, if nothing else.

"I will remain unless orders take me elsewhere."

"I'm happy to hear it." Jase offered Euphemism his hand, and Euphemism took it. "By the way," he asked, "why do people call you Euphemism?"

The Army man stiffened. "My real name is Ronald Fux, sir. F-U-X, like the composer."

Jase tried very hard not to smile. He failed. "Very well, Lieutenant," he said. "Welcome aboard."

"Your servant, sir." Touching his cap brim. "What happens next?"

Jase glanced uneasily up the river. "The crew will be permitted to celebrate tonight. But in the morning, I want everyone at stations. Once Farragut finds out I've sunk his boats, he's going to come looking for us. He's not one to let this sort of insult stand."

"Perhaps he will not find out."

Jase laughed. "He'll find out from our newspapers! I'm sure enterprising Vicksburg newsboys sell the local rags to the Yankees every day."

Euphemism's mustache gave a twitch. "I hadn't considered that."

"I think we'll be in a scrap before the week is out. Probably in two or three days."

There was a blare of brass on the bluff above their heads, and then the thump of a drum. "'Bonnie Blue Flag'?" Jase wondered aloud, "or 'Dixie'?"

Euphemism tilted his head, listened for a moment. "'Hail to the Chief,'" he said.

"I think you may be right."

The band came marching down the bluff to the river, followed by most of the town's civilian population. News had reached the population of *Arcola*'s victory on the Yazoo.

Which meant, Jase thought as he doffed his boater to wave it at the crowd, that Farragut would find out tomorrow.

13.

Jason seeketh the blind prophet Phineus, and finds him beset by Harpies

Tomorrow brought Pendergas, the senator and his wife bellowing into town on a special early morning train. Jase traveled up the bluff to meet them at the headquarters of General Van Dorn, who commanded the department. Van Dorn was thin, shorter even than Jase, and pugnacious; he was an able general who had never won a battle, and Jase reckoned that Van Dorn wasn't about to win this one, either. Pendergas demanded his ironclad. Jase refused to give it to him, and showed his authorization from Secretary Mallory. Tobacco juice sprayed from Pendergas's lips as he shouted that *Arcola* did not belong to the Secretary of the Navy. Jase replied that, on the contrary, it did. Pendergas demanded that Van Dorn put Jase under arrest. Jase suggested that if he were to be placed under arrest, it should be by the Department of the Navy, not the War Department; and further offered the opinion that in light of the losing battles of Belmont, Forts Henry and Donaldson, New Orleans, Island No. Ten, Shiloh, Memphis, and Corinth—he tactfully avoided mentioning Van Dorn's own defeat at Pea Ridge—he, Lt. Jase Miller, was the only successful Confederate commander west of Virginia, and that to place him under arrest would irretrievably damage the morale of the civilian population.

"Besides," Jase said, "my crew is personally loyal to me, and will fight for no one else."

"*You bribed them!*" Mrs. Pendergas roared.

"I paid them their wages," Jase said, "which is more than the senator ever did."

"*Snake in the grass!*" she screamed, and went for his eyes. For the next few moments Jase dodged about General Van Dorn's office, feeling like the *Bee* beset by an Eads ironclad, until Van Dorn and the senator between them got ahold of Madame Pendergas and wrestled her into a chair.

Van Dorn looked as if a twenty-pound Parrott rifle had just gone off next to his ear. "Gentlemen," he said, "this is out of my sphere. All I can do is wire Richmond."

"Your servant, sir," Jase said, saluted smartly, and made his way out.

In the street he asked directions, then walked east of the courthouse to a smart town house in the Empire style, with Corinthian capitals atop the pillars of its marbled portico and a truly astonishing array of flowers in the garden, all blossoming beneath a bronze statue of a nude Venus poised atop a fountain. The house, according to the bronze plate at the front gate, was called Lemnos.

A thickset, middle-aged woman opened the door to Jase's knock. She wore black mourning silks, and the frown on her face, so deep it looked as if it had been scarred into her with a knife, did not so much as twitch as Jase introduced himself and asked to speak to Phineas Proffitt Thackeray, former governor of the Territory of Missouri, onetime US emissary to the Sublime Porte and the Court of St. James, and member of the Cabinet under Jackson and Van Buren.

The woman's eyes gave a disdainful flicker. "The governor doesn't see anyone."

"I carry a letter from the Secretary of the Treasury," Jase said.

The woman gave a sniff, then stood away from the door. "You can come in, then, I suppose."

The house, Jase noted, was one of those in which the doorframes had been carefully painted to look like expensive imported wood instead of the cypress it probably was. The woman in black led Jase through the house and out the back door, where there was another extravagant garden, fountains and trellises, vines, flowers, and tinkling water. Governor Thackeray sat in the sun in a wrought-iron chair. He was a rail-thin elderly man with a long white beard and thick shoulder-length hair combed back off his forehead. His suit was of a slightly old-fashioned cut. Despite the thick summer heat he wore a blanket around his shoulders.

A woman sat next to him, reading aloud from a book. She wore a wide straw hat and carried a parasol against the sun. She was younger than the other woman, blonde and pretty, with a full, pouting lower lip. She wore white against the other's black.

The governor's head snapped up at the sound of Jase's boots on the garden's brick walk. "Who is this, daughter?" he asked.

The woman in black answered. "It's a Lt. Miller of the Treasury," she said.

"Of the Navy Department, ma'am," Jase said.

The woman glared at him. "He said Treasury, father."

"Miller of the *Arcola?*" the younger woman asked. "Why, you're a *hero!*"

The older woman's deep frown turned deeper still. The governor rose from his chair, offered his hand. With the blanket around his shoulders he looked dignified as a Roman senator in his toga.

"Honored to meet you, sir," the governor said.

"The honor is mine."

"Permit me to introduce my daughters. This—" nodding toward the younger, "Is Harpina. And you have already met—" turning to the woman in mourning, "Mrs. Hellstrom."

"Honored," Jase said. Harpina bobbed him a curtsey, but Jase barely noticed it. Something about the governor had drawn his attention. When he had turned to his older daughter, he had not quite faced her—his stern gaze had gone off at a slight angle. And when Jase looked at his eyes, he saw the blue-white film over the pupils. Cataracts.

Governor Thackeray, he realized with a kind of chill, was blind.

"Sit down, sir," the governor said. He sat, rearranged his blanket. "Lyncea—" to the older daughter. "Bring Lt. Miller a chair."

"I have a letter from the Secretary of the Treasury," Jase said as Lyncea went for a servant.

"Give it to Harpina," the governor said. "My daughters are useless, stupid women, the both of them, but at least their eyes are sound."

Jase reluctantly handed the letter to Harpina, not knowing if she was exactly the person in whom to confide the Treasury's secrets. Harpina marked her place in the book with a feather, and broke the seal on the envelope. "This is to introduce Lt. Miller," she said, "who has the confidence of the Government in the matter of the shipment from Nashville. . . ."

14.

The tale of the Golden Fleece is related

Earlier that year, on the sixteenth day of February, twelve thousand Confederate soldiers surrendered to General U.S. Grant at Fort Donelson, opening all of central and western Tennessee to Union occupation. Panic descended on Nashville as its tiny Confederate garrison tried to evacuate vast amounts of military stores in the face of terrified mobs. Amid the biscuit, saddles, salt pork, arms, and rifling machines sent at the last minute out of the city were thirty-five million dollars in gold and silver shipped by special train to Memphis.

The money joined another thirty million dollars in the city's vaults, the entire amount now defended by the River Defense Fleet of the Confederate Army, the River Defense Fleet that the North's Flag Officer Davis had sunk with so little trouble in June. At the last possible hour, Jase was told, Governor Thackeray, acting on his own initiative, managed to get the sixty-five million dollars onto a boat heading downriver to Vicksburg. But the boat had broken down south of Helena, and the gold and silver had been taken ashore and buried in a location known only to the governor. But since then the river north of Vicksburg had been patrolled by the Union, and it had been impossible to retrieve the money.

But now the balance of power had changed. *Arcola* ruled the river. And Governor Thackeray was supposed to lead Jase to the South's buried fortune.

But Governor Thackeray was blind. How he could find a buried treasure in the tangled wilderness of the Mississippi flood plain—or even have buried it in the first place—was more than Jase could imagine.

Harpina finished reading the letter—fortunately it was couched in euphemism—and then she giggled. "Sounds like a conspiracy," she said.

"Hush!" her sister snapped. "Don't talk about what you don't understand."

Harpina tossed her head. "I can say what I like," she said. "It's clear from the letter that Daddy is supposed to take Lt. Miller to something the Treasury wants, but I don't know how he can lead Lt. Miller anywhere, blind as he is. . . ."

"It is not necessary to go on about our father's affliction," said Lyncea. "This letter has to do with the Sacred Cause of our nation, and your speculations are unseemly and foolish. You'll be rattling your featherbrained notions all over town, and probably getting everything wrong."

"Fiddlesticks," said Harpina. "And fiddlesticks to your Cause, too."

Lyncea reddened. "How dare you speak disrespectfully of the Cause! The Cause for which my husband and his brothers gave their lives!"

"*My* intended is in a Yankee prison, but *I* don't go moping about, or let it interfere with my life."

"*Obviously,*" Lyncea said.

"*Leave us,*" the governor said forcefully, "the both of you. Go and get dinner ready—our guest will be staying."

The two ladies left, glaring at each other.

"My second family," the governor said. "My first, the children I made when I was young, either died or disgraced me. So I married again, and *this*—" he shook his shaggy head. "This is the result. The silliest, stupidest creatures ever born. My son—" his face hardened, and acid entered his voice. "The war has taken my son. And my third daughter is a perfect savage, the most wayward and self-willed reptile ever to reject civilization—she will not live even in as settled a place as Vicksburg. What a brood God has given me! What a vile travesty of a family to beset a man in his old age!"

Jase could think of no response. An old blind man, he considered, had every reason to be bitter.

But the governor seemed to have forgotten his audience. "A travesty of a family," he said, "in a travesty of a country. I argued against this war—I addressed the legislature, sir!—but they scorned me. They do not know the North as I do. They did not realize how well those men would fight, or know that the North has its own genius. All they heard was their own vainglorious words, their own foolish defiance. And the war has shown that I was right. With the exception of Manassas and the Seven Days, there has been only one defeat after another."

He gave a savage laugh. "Those fools in Memphis made no effort to secure the gold in the bank vaults! The *gold!* They believed the River Defense Fleet was invincible, that Memphis would never fall! They thought my warnings absurd. They left it to *me!*—to me, the man who despises them all. Fortunately I was a director of three Memphis banks, and could act. Well, if the gold is safe now, and if Mississippi can survive another year without suffering devastation and occupation, it is on account of me, the man our wise leaders despised as a compromiser and a Unionist! And you, sir—"

The man's blind eyes snapped to Jase, staring right at him, and Jase felt himself take a breath.

"So," the governor said, "I hear your *Arcola* is invincible, just like the River Defense Fleet."

"I hope never to test the assumption, sir," Jase said.

The governor gave a skeletal grin. "That is not an answer typical of your class."

"I am not a typical officer. That is why I've received this assignment."

"And your plans for recovering the specie?"

"Farragut will come after my boat," Jase said. "He isn't the sort of man to permit his ships to be sunk without striking back. If we survive his assault, then I will try to get *Arcola* up the river, to the place you direct."

"You will take me along."

Jase hesitated. "Sir?"

"I want to be free of those two bitches of mine. If I don't get out of this place, they'll either finish me off with an apoplexy, or I'll kill them with my bare hands."

"Sir," Jase said, and fumbled with his thoughts. "Forgive me—but I wonder—your daughter Miss Harpina seemed to imply that you will be incapable of leading us to the treasure."

The governor gave a thin-lipped smile. "I can't. But I can lead you to the person who can, and for that you will have to take me to my plantation Delrío."

"And where is Delrío, sir?"

"Forty miles up the river."

With two Federal fleets in between, Jase thought. Now *that* was cause for thought.

Dinner followed. Lyncea and Harpina bickered the entire time. Governor Thackeray seemed so disgusted by the performance that he ate little more than two bites of the meat that Lyncea insisted on cutting for him. Before the meal was quite finished, Jase had enough: he looked at his watch, announced that he was late for a meeting, and excused himself. Harpina walked him to the door. She reached for the knob, then her boot seemed to catch on the carpet and she pitched backward, into Jase's arms.

She looked up at him and giggled. "Are you sure you have to leave?" she asked. "Wouldn't you rather have a nice fuck?"

Jase considered the warm girl in his arms. "Aren't you to be married?" he asked.

"My fiancé was captured at Fort Donelson. He wouldn't mind if I go on enjoying myself. And don't worry about my daddy—he'll growl and spit, but I think he really enjoys hearing about these things."

Jase set Harpina on her feet. "I really must go."

She thrust out her lower lip. Jase kissed her hand before he left, and was glad to be gone.

15.

Jason seeketh guidance from the pilot Dascylus

Pendergas came to *Arcola*'s berth the next day to make a speech from the levee, and win back the hearts of his crew: the Army men ignored him, and the Navy men jeered. Van Dorn sat in his headquarters and did nothing. And that night, Farragut came down the Mississippi with his whole fleet, all the huge black sea-going frigates with their towering masts, their wooden hulls, and their long, flashing broadsides.

Farragut wanted no part of *Arcola,* that was clear. He kept to the right bank, away from the ram and Vicksburg's river batteries. His ships were silhouetted by bonfires the rebels had prepared on the far bank, and *Arcola* and Vicksburg's hundred guns fired away for over an hour while the Federals fired back. Only an occasional shot rang on *Arcola*'s armor: it was likely that in the dark, with all targets obscured by gunsmoke, the Federals had no clear idea where *Arcola* was berthed, and apparently they weren't about to venture close enough to find out.

Dawn light revealed no wreckage, no toppled masts or gutted hulls, and this suggested that the Federals had paraded past Vicksburg without loss to themselves. The Confederates had suffered nothing except for six men wounded by a gun bursting in one of the river batteries.

Vicksburg, apparently, was saved. Farragut was taking his wooden ships back to salt water. The band marched forth for another impromptu parade, and the people of the town swarmed into the batteries and down to the waterfront to rain on their heroes both garlands and whiskey.

In the midst of the celebrations came a telegram from Richmond announcing Jase's promotion to commander, which Jase hoped Van Dorn would take as an indication of the government's attitude toward his usurpation of the *Arcola.*

The next day Van Dorn invited him to headquarters. "*Arcola*'s very presence has driven half the Yanks off the river," he said, "and you've sunk a significant fraction of the second half. With *Arcola* on the river, all the Northern garrisons are cut off from their support. With your cooperation, Captain Miller, I propose an immediate descent of the river, with my forces and yours, to recapture Baton Rouge and New Orleans."

"General," Jase said, "I'm afraid that my orders take me up the river, not down. Once I complete my mission, however, you may consider *Arcola* at your disposal."

"*Up* the river?" Van Dorn narrowed his eyes. "May I know the nature of this mission, Captain Miller?"

"I regret to say, General, that my orders do not permit me to give you that information."

The general's brows narrowed. He stroked his pointed imperial. "But surely nothing could possibly take precedence over the recovery of Louisiana? The campaign would be over in a matter of weeks, and then you could proceed upriver on your mission—and with my army accompanying."

"I can't disappoint Richmond, sir."

"Whatever it is they've ordered you to do, I'm sure Richmond would be far more pleased with New Orleans returned to the Confederacy."

"Sir, I regret that I can't oblige you."

Van Dorn's dark face flushed darker still. "You are refusing? And if I should put my request in the form of an order?"

"I should be unable to oblige."

"Damn it, man!"

Van Dorn argued, then stormed, then raged. Jase held firm. "If you force me, I will put General Pendergas in command of the ram!" Van Dorn said.

Jase shook his head. "With Pendergas in command of *Arcola,* you'll be lucky to hang on to Mississippi, let alone take Louisiana."

"I'll find someone else! Vicksburg is full of river men!"

"None who have the confidence both of the people and of Richmond," Jase said.

Van Dorn glared. "You presume a damned great deal for a junior officer!" he said.

Jase saluted. "Your servant, sir."

Bell, book, and candle shall not drive me back, he thought, When gold and silver becks me to come on.

He returned to *Arcola* to find that Harry Klee had located a Mississippi River pilot to take them upstream. He was a plump, comfortable-looking man named Dashiell, who had spent eight years piloting boats along the great river before retiring at the opening of hostilities. He knew the way to Delrío Landing perfectly well.

"At night?" Jase asked.

"Certainly."

"Do you know a place where we might hide *Arcola* in the daytime?"

Dashiell considered. "There is a towhead called Ajax Bar just above Fitler Bend. I figure it ain't more'n two miles from Delrío Landing. The river's at a high stage, so I reckon we can get your boat into the channel behind the towhead. The towhead's covered with willows and cottonwood, so I don't guess anyone will see you from the river." He shrugged. "It's been over a year since I've had any reason to investigate Ajax Bar, so the soundings may have changed or silted up entirely. But Ajax is your best bet. If not, I can tuck you behind Stack Island or Pittman Island."

"Can you show me on a map?"

"If you have a map, certainly." Dashiell put one plump finger to his forehead. "Though, if I may say so, sir, the only *useful* map is *here*. And that is what you are purchasing with what, if your mate is to be believed, is certainly a highly generous consideration. Certainly a sum to make it worth my leaving retirement."

Jase smiled and offered Dashiell one of Senator Pendergas's cigars. "Well, Mr. Dashiell," he said, "if your map is as correct as you think it is, the government's money is well spent. And if it's not—" He grinned. "I reckon I'll just have to shoot you."

Dashiell's lips parted in a smile, and then he caught sight of the look in Jase's green eyes, and the smile froze on his lips.

"Harry," Jase said to Klee, "I need you ashore. We must pay a visit to Governor Thackeray."

16.

The *Argo* entereth the hostile sea

Arcola and *General Bee* steamed out of Vicksburg late that afternoon, cruising at easy speed on the wide silver water. The crew stood at quarters, guns loaded and run out. Harry Klee had constructed another spar torpedo, and it stood poised on its boom above the *Bee*'s foredeck. *Bee* towed its two coal barges—any coal supply available upriver would be one they would have to fight for. Though none of Flag Officer Davis's Yankee ironclads had been seen in these waters since Farragut had taken his deep-water flotilla downriver, that did not mean they weren't lurking somewhere about, or waiting for *Arcola* to leave the sheltering batteries of Vicksburg and expose itself to destruction.

General Bee took the lead, ranging a mile or two ahead as a scout. If *Bee* ran into trouble, she'd give *Arcola* warning, then run back and fall in behind her armor.

Governor Thackeray lay in a hammock swung between two of the broadside guns. Jase and Klee had taken him away from his protesting daughters that afternoon. When the old man's feet had faltered on the road leading down from Vicksburg's bluff, Harry Klee picked him up and carried him as easily as he would have carried a child.

Night fell, and the two vessels skimmed along the starlit channel. They were in a kind of no-man's land—there was no Federal garrison south of Helena, but neither was there any Confederate force in the area other than some local units of militia. The North had commanded the river till now, ironclads and gunboats moving freely on the water, and the only reason they had not planted troops on the soil of Mississippi or Arkansas was that they had not thought the soil worth the taking.

No vessel, belonging to either nation, was seen on the river. Dawn found *Arcola* hovering in deep soundings off the southern point of Ajax Bar, a long narrow sandy island, crowded with vegetation and hard by the Mississippi bank of the river. Dashiell took *Bee* behind the bar to make soundings, and then, when the depth of the water proved sufficient, the tug returned to tow *Arcola* into the narrow channel. The ironclad dropped anchor and swung in the brisk current that scoured the chute behind the island. There was nothing but wilderness to be seen: no homes, no fields, no boats, nothing made by man, just cottonwoods and willows that trailed their branches in the brown water.

Jase had warps carried out to Ajax Bar and to the Mississippi shore to keep the ram in the deepest part of the chute. Canvas awnings were spread to keep the crew from cooking in their iron box. Harry Klee, left aboard *Arcola* in command, was warned to post lookouts on the island, to keep a weather eye for Yankees, and to pay close attention to the stage of the river. Jase didn't want *Arcola* stranded here should the Mississippi fall.

Klee brought one of the coal barges alongside and began the process of refilling *Arcola*'s bunkers. A trained crew could shift eight tons of coal per hour, using shovels alone: Jase would be happy with half that. Jase shaved, changed his shirt, and transferred to *General Bee*. Klee carried Governor Thackeray over to join him. The tug carried them upriver, past Ben Lomond and Stack Island, to Delrío Landing, where Jase stepped ashore with Faren Smith and Put-Up-Your-Dukes, whose swollen, blackened jaw was still bound in a handkerchief. Together they helped the governor ashore. Faren Smith walked arm-in-arm with the blind man, and carried his Whitworth rifle in the crook of the other arm.

Delrío's levee was at least a mile from the landing, through thick country. The river had once flowed through this area, but in the recent past the river crabbed over toward Arkansas, stranding the plantation far inland. Once Jase climbed the levee he saw, from what had been the edge of the river, a live-oak alley leading to a many-chimneyed plantation house. Jase walked through the alley, past the strange, contorted live-oaks, their limbs warped into fantastic, deformed shapes as if by some sinister magic.

The black footman who answered the governor's knock wore livery and sweated beneath a white periwig. "Sir!" he said in surprise.

"Take me to the garden," said the old man, "and tell my daughter I am here."

17.
Jason meeteth the Princess Medea

"I like a garden," Thackeray said, as he took his seat, amid a profusion of blossoms, in a cane chair. "I had large gardens planted in all my homes after my sight began to fail." He threw his head back and stared unblinkingly, defiantly, at the morning sun. "The scent of the flowers brings back pleasant memories." He looked down, scowled. "And helps to obliterate unpleasant ones."

"They shall sit every man under his vine," Jase said, "and under his fig tree."

A woman appeared, hurrying toward them from beneath a vine-covered arch. The governor glanced sharply in her direction at the sound of her boots on the brick walkways.

"This is my youngest daughter," the old man said. "'Melia." Jase lifted his boater off his head. The young woman curtsied.

She was a small, brown-skinned girl. She wore a ragged straw bonnet with a frayed ribbon, a worn brown cotton sack dress belted around her waist with a rope, and an old pair of heavy leather gloves crusted with the black soil of the Mississippi Delta. She carried a garden spade in one hand, and perched on her nose were round smoked spectacles that concealed her eyes. Jase wondered if eye problems ran in the family.

"Pardon my appearance," 'Melia said to Jase. "I was working in my garden."

The governor looked stern. "We have servants for that sort of thing, 'Melia," he said.

"I *like* working in the garden, father," she said. "The servants never get it the way I like it."

The governor leaned back, inhaled the scent of the blossoms. "It is a splendid garden, that's true. More fragrant than our other houses. And the sound of the wind through the blossoms is remarkably soothing." He nodded. "You have the gift, 'Melia, to be sure."

He turned to Jase with one of those piercing, unnerving looks that seemed so impossible in a blind man. "This is Captain Miller, daughter," he said. "He is the man the Navy has sent to take you upriver."

'Melia curtsied again as Jase looked at her in surprise. "You, miss?" he said. "You know where the—" His tongue stumbled.

She looked at him through her eerie smoked spectacles. "Where the gold is hidden? Yes. I was my father's eyes on that journey, and hid the gold myself."

"I have to give 'Melia the credit," the governor said. "The Yankees would have got it all if it hadn't been for her efforts." His lip curled. "Not that it might not be better if they had. If the Confederate government gets its hand on this money, they will use it only to prolong this ruinous folly of a war."

"Better it should be spent on *our* follies than the Yanks'," Jase said.

Amusement tilted the corners of 'Melia's mouth. "Have you any particular follies in mind, Captain Miller?"

He bowed. "I am open to suggestions, miss."

The old man's blind eyes favored them each with a savage glare. "You have no time for follies, either of you. I imagine the captain will want to steam upriver tonight, and you should make yourself ready for the journey."

'Melia gave Jase an inquiring look. "Yes," he said. "Tonight, if that is possible. The less time spent waiting on the river, the less time in which we can be detected by a Yankee patrol."

"Make yourself ready, then," the governor said. "Tell the servants to prepare dinner." He gave a sniff. "And change your clothes, girl! I'm sure you look as if you just walked out of a swamp."

18.

Blind Phineus doth prophesy

"Absurdity!" Governor Thackeray said over dinner. "Madness! To put all your money on slavery!" The governor snorted. "Utter foolishness—a nation of slaves in the modern world."

Jase and 'Melia looked at each other. The custom at dinner, it seemed, was that guests listened while the governor declaimed. 'Melia gave Jase a wry, apologetic smile and looked down at her plate.

She did not wear her smoked spectacles indoors. Her eyes were brown, with pupils wide as saucers. She had changed into an elegant silk princess gown, with puffed sleeves that showed off her tiny hands. Small and quick and elegantly dressed, she hardly seemed the uncivilized creature of the woods that her father had described.

Like good sailors, Faren Smith and Put-Up-Your-Dukes were paying attention mainly to their dinners. But the boxer, Jase noted, chewed carefully, and only on one side of his mouth.

"I should have anticipated it," the governor continued. "Slavery is the way to wealth for the mediocre man. A genius will make a success of himself no matter what his situation, but for a man of modest talents there is no more certain way to wealth than through exploiting the labor of his fellow men. The mediocre *need* slavery to prosper, and because they need it, they will fight for it. And," sighing heavily, "the mediocre, by definition, outnumber the rest of us."

A periwigged servant offered asparagus from a Sevres platter. Jase waved him away, and turned to the governor.

"You talk as if you weren't a planter yourself."

"I *started* as a planter, sir," the old man said. "I took eighty niggers over the passes from Virginia, marched them down the Natchez Trace, and carved out my first plantation when the Louisiana Purchase was young. And I've built other plantations since, up and down the river. But I knew the future wasn't in it—once I'd made my fortune I sold all but one of my first plantations and put my money into shipping, banking, and manufacturing. I currently own seven plantations, but four of those are outfits to which I made loans and on which I subsequently had to foreclose. The war will destroy all seven, I expect, and the houses in Vicksburg and Natchez. Good riddance." He gave a dreamy smile. "I will miss the gardens, though."

Faren Miller signed to one of the servants to bring him more sliced duck. 'Melia turned to Jase. "Do you have slaves yourself?"

"No," Jase said, "but I'm no abolitionist. I've met any number of men who deserve to be enslaved."

She nodded. "So have I."

He wondered if he could shock Miss 'Melia, if it were possible to shock anyone in this family.

"I did not mean Africans only," Jase said.

She looked at him sidelong through her narrow eyes. "Neither did I," she said.

The governor laughed at this, and his amusement rang down the table.

19.
Medea's history is related

Governor Thackeray offered Jase and his men guest rooms in which to rest for the evening's voyage, but Jase said he'd rather rest in one of the garden's viney arbors, a sentiment of which the governor seemed to approve. Jase found a couch in a garden pavilion covered with white gingerbread, fancy as a river steamer, and took a few hours' sleep. The sound of boot-heels on the walkway woke him, and he looked up to see Miss 'Melia moving along the walk with a basket in her hand. She had taken off her silks, and wore instead a split riding skirt, a businesslike white blouse, a bow tie, and her smoked spectacles. She entered beneath the same arching trellis through which he'd first seen her, and vanished from sight.

Jase buttoned his jacket and followed after.

He found her in an herb garden, bending beneath the statue of a bearded Greek who carried a phial in each hand, as if offering them. Polished brass snakes wrapped each of his arms. 'Melia looked up at the sound of Jase's approach, but did not rise.

"Did I wake you, Captain Miller?" she said. "If so, I apologize."

Jase tipped his boater. "I wasn't asleep," he said. "May I help you?"

"That won't be necessary. I am taking some stone-root to make a poultice for your Mr. Jackson. I don't think his jaw is healing properly, and your surgeon's mate is only giving him willow bark." She stood, placed roots into her basket.

"I have given him poppy to ease the pain, then I will tie two of his teeth together to align his jaw properly. After which the stone-root will help reduce his swelling."

"Your father didn't mention you were accomplished in such things," Jase said. He looked about the garden, recognized peppermint, sage, comfrey, bayberry, thyme. . . .

She tilted her head, smiled. "I'm *very* accomplished, I fear. I can call this modest plant stone-root, or horse-root, or *souche du cheval,* or *collinsonia canadensis,* if you like." She stiffened, and her look turned defiant. "At one time I studied to be a physician. Since medical schools will not accept women, I studied under Dr. MacHaon in Natchez before his death. When the war began I offered my services to the Confederate medical service, but they declined to employ me."

"How shortsighted of them," Jase said.

"I couldn't help but be an improvement over the butchers the government *did* employ," she said tartly. "I have seen the lists of casualties. The healthy die of camp fever, and the wounded of sepsis. A little knowledge applied with intelligence, and so many could be saved . . . but it's all being bungled, as the entire war is being bungled."

Jase detected in 'Melia's words an echo of her father's bitterness.

There was a moment of silence, and then her defiance eased. "Well," she said. "At least I keep my father healthy, and all our people." She pointed at a bushy flowering plant with bell-shaped flowers. "This is belladonna. A lovely flower, isn't it? I used it to dilate my father's pupils when he began to go blind—it enabled him to see around the cataract, until it grew."

"I thought it was poison," Jase said. "Deadly nightshade."

"All poisons have their uses. I have a great many poisons in my garden—here is foxglove, here is poppy. Datura you will know, perhaps as

Jamestown or Jimson weed. I have taken all of them myself, and recorded the symptoms to add to the medical literature."

He looked at her in surprise. "Wasn't that dangerous?"

"Of course it was." Impatiently. "But it's common among medical people to experiment on themselves, and it's one of the ways those of us—" her mouth twisted, "—who cannot practice, may nonetheless be of use. At any rate, I survived. The experience in each case was not entirely unpleasant. Poisons may liberate the spirit, even as they suppress or stimulate the body."

She looked up at the statue of the Greek. "This is Asclepius, the Father of Medicine. He offers the vials of Gorgon's blood that were given him by Athene. One heals, the other kills. But which is which? Medicine has its paradoxes, you see."

"If I were your father," Jase said, "I wouldn't have let you do it."

"My father does not compromise," 'Melia said. "He cannot—it is not in his blood—and his blood runs in my veins. I do nothing by halves. If I study medicine, I don't *half*-study it, I don't say, *this* of the vials of Asclepius is for me, and the other I reject. One must know death in order to know life."

"Death comes soon enough, it seems to me."

"I would rather be dead in truth, than dead in spirit." She reached into her pocket, withdrew some seeds. "Blue morning glory," she said. "Would you like some? I take it when reality grows too oppressive."

Jase looked down at the seeds he had been told were deadly poison, would either kill him or turn him raving mad, then looked up into 'Melia's round dark spectacles. "No thank you, miss," he said. "I guess I need a clear head to get us up the Mississippi."

"So you do." She put two of the seeds in her mouth, dropped the remainder in her pocket, and put her arm through his. "Now walk with me to your crewman, and we'll see what I can do for his poor jaw."

20.
Medea joineth fortunes with Jason

"You need not stop here on your return," Governor Thackeray said. "I will be comfortable enough with my garden and my retainers."

"What if the Yankees come?" 'Melia asked. "They'll burn Delrío down and steal the servants."

"They can burn it, for all I care, and me in it," the governor said. "We can all go to Hell together."

'Melia left her father, came aboard *General Bee* in her split riding skirt, and was made a guest of the wardroom. Put-Up-Your-Dukes—whose jaw already seemed to have reduced its swelling—carried her small valise and a leather medical bag filled with her instruments and potions. The tug returned to the waiting *Arcola,* Jase and 'Melia transferred to the ram, and *Arcola* raised its anchor, backed slowly from behind Ajax Bar, and started its journey northward just as the sun turned the horizon scarlet.

Miss 'Melia was given the same hammock her father had occupied, and in the light of the battle lanterns she swung demurely in its embrace, her tiny booted feet clear of the deck. When Jase ventured from the pilot house to the gun deck he found her enjoying the polite attentions of the officers, particularly Lt. Euphemism. She was in a laughing mood, pupils broad as gunports as she nibbled the morning glory seeds in her pocket.

At dawn, Dashiell slipped *Arcola* behind a towhead near a place called Myrtle Grove. The stacks of the two boats towered over the flat country, and the crew was sent up to wreath them in greenery in hopes that, at a sufficient distance, the stacks might pass for trees.

Jase had awnings spread to keep the summer sun off the iron casemate, gave the crew breakfast, then had them transfer coal from the barge to *Arcola*'s bunkers. After several hours' rest, Jase ordered dinner prepared, then mustered the crew of both boats on *Arcola*'s gun deck. He stood on a box so everyone could see him.

Being a short man amid all these hulking bruisers had its disadvantages.

"You know that we have all been chosen for a special mission," Jase said. "And what I am now happy to tell you is that the special mission involves gold! Gold and silver!"

The crewmen murmured as their eyes glittered in the light of the sun shining through the gunports. Jase reckoned he had succeeded in attracting their attention.

"After the Yanks took Memphis," he went on, "sixty-five million dollars' worth of Confederate gold and silver, all in coin, was buried upriver from here. And it was this young lady—" pointing with his hat at 'Melia, "—who, with her father, buried the money and can lead us to the hiding place. We are assigned to recover it! We are going to return to Vicksburg ballasted not with pig iron, but with silver dollars and gold eagles!"

The casemate buzzed with the sound of the crew talking among themselves. Jase signaled Castor to blow his pipe and order the men to silence. Jase gave them a feral smile as they grew quiet.

"I have negotiated for us a generous share as prize money, and arranged that the money shall be shared out as soon as we complete our mission in Vicksburg. So keep a sharp lookout, and we'll all be rich men."

More sensation. Jase had the crew dismissed, then escorted Miss 'Melia to dinner in *General Bee*'s wardroom.

"You have got your men in a state of excitement," 'Melia said later, as she strolled beneath the awnings with Jase on the tug's afterdeck. "They didn't know why they were going upriver till now?"

Jase put a hand on the breech of the tug's twenty-pound Parrott rifle. "They knew there was money in it," he said. "They trusted me for the rest."

"If it were up to me," 'Melia said, looking at him through her smoked spectacles, "I would have reported the money sunk, and kept the location a secret till the end of the war. It was my father who insisted on making a report to the government. He doesn't care about any of us—he takes pleasure in the thought of everything being destroyed by the war, his family as well as the rest. He passes on the money as if it's a curse."

Jase looked down at her. "You're very frank."

She laughed. "Mendacity is too exhausting unless there's a point to it. I know what I want, and I don't see why I should conceal it."

Jase stepped close to her. "What is it you want, then, Miss 'Melia?"

She leaned one elbow on the Parrott rifle. A smile tweaked at the corners of her mouth. "Remembrance is a treacherous thing," she smiled. "And one piece of the Mississippi looks very much like another. It would be a pity if my memory were inadequate to the situation—I'd have to stay upriver, perhaps till after the war. And then the money would be lost, at least to the Confederacy."

Jase nodded. This wasn't entirely unexpected. "I believe," he said, "that Secretary Benjamin understands that in wartime, things can go astray. Sacks of coins are awkward things, hard to move from one place to the next. They can get lost. I reckon that as long as the bulk of the money gets to Vicksburg, the government will be grateful enough."

She put her arm in his. "I am used to accepting masculine guidance in money matters," she said. "Perhaps I should follow your example, then, and take a share equal to yours."

"I will see that it happens."

She looked up at him. "And you, Captain Miller? What is it *you* want—with the money?"

"There's no point in buying agricultural land," Jase said. "The price'll drop after the war, no matter who wins. I figure to buy property in port towns—there will be shipping under us or under the Yanks. Maybe buy a boat yard in Charleston or Mobile after the blockade drives the prices down. Build blockade runners—blockade runners are the way to make money in this war. But you want to just buy shares in many ships, you don't want to own the things outright. That way you don't lose too much money when the ship is captured. Because they will all be captured, sooner or later."

"I can see you have thought this out."

"I try to keep ahead of people," Jase said. "Keep the bulge on 'em, and they'll do what you want."

"So this whole business is just a means to an end?" she asked. "*Arcola,* the battle, this crew, my father, myself? Just a way to make yourself rich?"

Jase said nothing, just looked at her.

"Captain," 'Melia said, "you are beginning to interest me."

21.

Herakles abandoneth the expedition

Night began to fall, and *Arcola* maneuvered from behind its hiding place and began its journey upriver. *General Bee* forged ahead as a scout. At three bells of the morning watch, a cool northern wind began to drift across the river, and Jase saw feathers of fog rising from the warm surface of the water. He cursed under his breath, and hoped that Harry Klee would drop back and rejoin them. The mist rose, thickened, grew dense. The stars vanished as the fog closed overhead. Jase ordered ahead slow, and the ironclad crept ahead, barely making progress against the current. Leadsmen were sent forward to sound the water's depth. Dashiell, sitting next to Jase on the pilothouse roof with his legs dangling into the casemate, seemed to navigate purely by memory, enhanced by glimpses of the shore revealed by gaps in the fog.

Damn, Jase thought. Where is *General Bee?*

"Scrubgrass Crossing," Dashiell said. "Port your helm. Ring the engine room for more turns."

Castor, eyes wide in the iron-sheathed darkness of the casemate, obeyed in silence. He and everyone else aboard could only hope that the pilot wasn't as blind as they.

"Silence there!" Jase said, over the chant of the leadsmen. "Listen!"

There was a thrashing noise ahead, heard only barely through the sounds of *Arcola* under way, the thud of the engines and swirl of water over the prow.

"Side-wheeler," Dashiell whispered.

A Yankee. *Bee* had a screw, not paddle wheels. Jase heard a bell ring, heard the call of a leadsman whose accent marked his birthplace as north of the Ohio. "Half less three! By the mark three!"

"Wheel amidships," Dashiell called to Castor in a voice barely above a whisper. Then he leaned next to Jase. "We're making the crossing at the same time. God preserve us from a collision."

"Stand by, the bow gun," Jase ordered, and hoped that it wasn't one of the huge Eads ironclads out there, something big enough to bash in even *Arcola*'s reinforced bows.

The thrashing paddle wheels grew louder. Jase's hands clenched on the edges of the pilothouse. His mouth was dry.

"There!" Dashiell's hand was on his arm. "There, to port!" Briefly the fog parted, and Jase saw the Yankee's silhouette just as she passed: a lean, narrow boat, with twin stacks and a pilot house stacked high with sandbags.

One of the Yankees' fast wooden river rams, part of the same squadron to which *Arcola* had once belonged.

The ram disappeared into the mist astern. Jase held his breath, listening for sounds of an alarm.

Nothing, nothing but the thrashing of the paddles and the receding chant of the leadsmen. *Arcola* hadn't been seen.

"Port your helm." Dashiell whispered the order.

"They're looking for us," Jase said. "They know we're on the river."

And he wondered if the Yanks knew what *Arcola* was looking *for*.

22.

Medea guideth Jason to the Golden Fleece

Dawn found *Arcola* still blind in the fog. Wet soaked through Jase's jacket, dripped from his hair and the brim of his hat. He ignored his misery, his nerves strung taut for the sound of a Yankee squadron.

"That's Laconia to port," Dashiell said. "I've taken you as far as I can, without clearer instruction."

"Pass the word for Miss Thackeray," Jase ordered.

"Do you know the chute behind Island 68?" 'Melia asked when she arrived. "We need to get into it."

Dashiell shook his head. "Can't do *that* in the fog," he said.

"You'll probably have to enter above the island," 'Melia said. "There are rapids at the foot of the chute."

Dashiell looked unhappy. He turned up his collar against the dripping fog. "I'd rather do the Laconia crossing in daylight. It's a tricky one."

"Then we wait," said Jase. "Maybe the *Bee* will rejoin us."

The fog began to burn away an hour after dawn. Jase tensed, half-expecting to see four or five Eads ironclads lined up ahead of him, guns run out and aimed down his throat.

The river was empty. Dashiell called for half speed ahead, and began maneuvering into the crossing. Miss 'Melia, still in the pilothouse, put on her smoked spectacles.

"Where is *Bee?*" Jase wondered.

"If she'd run into Yankees, we would have heard," Dashiell said.

"Most likely," Jase said. Though sometimes sound did strange things, and gunfire was not heard by people who should have been within easy listening distance.

It was likely, though, that *Bee* simply anchored in the fog, failed to see *Arcola* steam past, and was now pounding up the river after them.

Jase fingered his chin and considered the loss of the coal barge that *Bee* was towing. If *Bee* didn't appear with the coal, *Arcola* might not have enough fuel to return to Vicksburg. Once the ironclad was hidden, he would have to let the boilers cool in order to conserve fuel.

'Melia proved right about the dangers of the lower chute behind Island 68. The remains of a steamboat lay on the rocks, its stacks thrown into the current, white water foaming over the broken decks.

"*Felicity,*" 'Melia said. "We came in her from Memphis. She blew her boiler and couldn't maneuver clear."

Dashiell managed to get *Arcola* into the upstream end of the chute stern-first, with the aid of leadsmen and some careful maneuvering. Trees hung close on either side of the anchorage, and brushed the stacks as the ironclad moved past. Once the anchor was dropped, Dashiell urged that warps be carried out to the trees on either bank to secure the ironclad in the event that the anchor dragged. Jase turned to 'Melia.

"How close are we to, ah, our goal?" Then he laughed at himself for his circumspection. There was no longer any reason to refrain from talking about the treasure.

"Not far," 'Melia said, "but I defy you to find the place without my guidance."

"Sir?" Castor asked, looking up from the wheel. "How are we to get ashore? *General Bee* has all the boats."

Jase barked a laugh. Three days on the river, in constant peril of their lives, and now this absurdity.

"This is a little skiff at Helius, our plantation," 'Melia said. "Just north of here, through the trees. Unless of course the river took it, or the Yankees."

"Can you see the river from Helius?" Jase asked.

"Yes."

"We'll set up a lookout for *General Bee.*" The tug would never find them here, not in this narrow passage lined with tall cottonwoods.

"I can swim," 'Melia said, "if it's necessary."

"It won't be," Jase said. "And I don't think we'll need your boat, either." He sent for strong swimmers to carry warps and lines ashore, then rigged a bosun's chair to take people to Arkansas. He, 'Melia, Faren Smith, Smith's Whitworth rifle, and four crewmen came to the land dry-shod. Jase wore his service pistol holstered at the small of his back.

Jase turned to Miss 'Melia, gave her a nod. "Will you take us to your hiding place, miss?" he asked.

She tilted her head, looked at him. "You will abide by our agreement, Captain?"

"Of course," he said, then added under his breath, so only she could hear, "It ain't *my* money."

She gave a merry laugh. "Better bring picks and shovels, then," she said, and after they were brought she turned to lead them inland. The country was so thick that they could move only on animal tracks. 'Melia guided them along one path after another, her little feet moving along the narrow trails with utter certainty. Eventually they came to a steep slope covered with vine-draped oak and sassafras.

"It's an old Indian mound," 'Melia said. "Built by the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, or so they say."

'Melia led them along the side of the mound till their path was blocked by a lightning-blackened pumpkin oak that sprawled across their path. The huge tangled ball of roots loomed over their heads.

'Melia turned around and grinned. "Here we are," she said.

Jase looked at the dense country and saw nothing. He peered over 'Melia's shoulder to see if the tree was hollow and the money might have been hidden there, but the tree seemed solid enough.

"There, captain!" Pointing at the slope above the ball of tree-roots. "We put turves over the hiding-place."

The toppling tree had pulled a huge ball of dirt into the air, leaving a kind of earthen cave where the roots had been, a ready-made hiding place. Jase had his crewmen begin their work with spades. In the fertile soil, the turves had already taken root, and were hard to dislodge. Beneath them was a layer of black soil, and then Jase heard the ring of metal as a spade struck something.

Jase felt excitement sing through his veins. The soil was cleared away by hand, revealing a canvas bag that Jase drew from its hiding place. He figured it had to weigh thirty pounds. Jase could smell rot in the canvas, but the stenciled legend *First State Bank of Nashville* could still be read. He tore away the rope that knotted the bag shut, reached in, pulled out a fistful of twenty-dollar double-eagles.

Gold. The head of Liberty gazed at him from the face of one coin.

There was a moment of silence, and then Faren Smith gave a whoop. The crewmen laughed and looked at the gold with shining eyes.

Jase turned to 'Melia, who was leaning on the old pumpkin oak and watching them through smoked lenses, a smile of delicate amusement on her lips.

"Is it all in canvas bags?" he asked.

"Unless the bags have rotted away," she said. "Some of the bags weren't very sound even when we buried them."

Jase let the coins spill between his fingers, hearing them chime as they hit the coins in the bag, and then he tied the bag shut again. He turned to one of the crew. "Bring me Chief Tyrus and the quartermaster." And when Tyrus and Castor arrived, Jase put Castor in charge of digging out the money.

"No one is to dig unless you're watching," he said. "You are to take charge personally of everything that comes out of the ground. No one else is to handle it but Chief Tyrus, who will convey it to the boat."

"Ay, sir," Castor said.

"If a bag breaks, you are to stop digging until every spilled coin can be accounted for. I'll send you some sacks from *Arcola* to carry any loose money."

"Sir."

Jase turned to Chief Tyrus. "You are to convey the money to the ram," he said. "Either carry it yourself, or have others carry it under your direct supervision. The money is to be in Castor's sight at all times, or in your own."

"Ay ay, sir."

"When you get the money to *Arcola,*" Jase said, "send it aboard via the bosun's chair." He smiled. "I'll put Euphemism in charge of stowing it. He seems an honest sort." His smile turned wolfish. "And the others will watch him, of course."

"Very good, sir," said Tyrus.

Jase looked up at Faren Smith, who cradled his Whitworth rifle in his arms. "Mr. Smith," he said, "anyone who fails to follow my instructions is clearly attempting to cheat his fellow crewmen and the Government. Your job is to shoot anyone who disobeys my orders."

Smith smiled. "With pleasure, sir," he said.

Jase handed the Chief the bag of coins. "Chief Tyrus," he said, "carry on."

"Sir." Tyrus saluted, turned, and began walking down the trail to the ram.

Jase and 'Melia followed at a more leisurely pace. "Can you trust these men?" she asked.

"I have to trust them sooner or later," Jase said. "If I trust them now, it's less likely that I'll wake up later with a slit throat."

Jase crossed to the ram to rig a pair of slings that would carry the money to the ram, and also to brief Euphemism concerning how to ballast a ship with gold and silver. An armed guard was posted on *Arcola*'s bilges, with a petty officer and Euphemism to guard the guards.

A pair of crewmen armed with carbines accompanied Jase and 'Melia to Helius, where he planned to set up a lookout for *General Bee*. Helius proved to be a modest frame plantation house set amid overgrown cotton fields.

"Our overseer joined the army and got killed at Pea Ridge," 'Melia said as Jase helped her over the rail fence that surrounded the property. "Mrs. Overby, his wife, tried to run the place till the Yankees came, said the field hands were contraband of war, and carried them off. Mrs. Overby went to Helena, where she had kin, but her last letter said there were a few servants remaining. Folks too old to leave—or too feeble, I suppose, to help the Yankees with their designs."

Miss 'Melia proved correct. There were five elderly blacks living on the property, three women and two men tending the little vegetable garden they'd planted for their own sustenance. 'Melia set them to cleaning the main house while Jase took his men across overgrown lawns to the landing, and posted them on a point nearby with a good view of the river. They carried carbines and flags to signal to *General Bee* if the tug appeared.

When Jase returned, he found the covers taken off the furniture in the front parlor, and 'Melia sitting on the sofa drinking water from a tin cup. "The Yankees took the silver and the china," she said, "but they couldn't take our spring water. Would you like some?"

"Thank you," Jase said. He took the cup from her fingers and sipped. There was whisky in the water. She patted the sofa cushion next to her.

"Please sit down, Captain."

"Thank you."

He removed his pistol belt and sat. She had taken off the smoked spectacles, and Jase noticed that her pupils were something like normal size. Perhaps she didn't need her morning glory seeds today, not with the stimulus of gold running through her veins.

"I would offer you dinner," she said, "but there's nothing. The Yankees ate the livestock and ran through our stores—all Helius can offer are some dried peas, salt pork, corn dodgers, and a quart of Bourbon I retrieved from my father's desk. You'd probably rather have your Navy ration."

"Your father has better whisky," Jase said.

"He never believed in rationing his own pleasures."

"I look forward," said Jase, "to following his example. I've been poor all my life, and I plan to spend the rest of my life enjoying the contrast."

'Melia looked at him. "I know people who could spend that money in a year."

Jase shook his head. "They must be people without any imagination."

She smiled. "I didn't think you were the sort to spend it foolishly. I wish my fiancé had that sort of drive."

He looked at her in surprise. "You're engaged to be married?"

One small hand floated to touch the globe of an elegant glass oil lamp, drifted idly over the inscribed glass figure of a horseman. "A planter's son. Good manners, a fine horseman, a splendid dancer. Rich, of course. Tall, broad-shouldered, handsome. But one day it occurred to me that this was *all* he was, that if you took away his manners and his horses and his mansion house there would be nothing left. He had no character or ideas that didn't come with his situation. He wasn't a bad man, or even a weak man—he was just, just—*nothing*. Tailored clothing stuffed with straw." Amusement tweaked her lips. "So I broke off the engagement—it was a great scandal, another reason for me to avoid the society of Natchez and Vicksburg—and later my beau became engaged to my sister Harpina. He joined the army last year, and was captured at Fort Donelson."

And now Harpina was offering herself to strange officers while her intended waited behind prison walls. "The poor man," Jase smiled.

She leaned back on the sofa, took the whisky-spiked water from his hand. "You're not like him at all," she said. "Take away your commission, your *Arcola,* your share of the treasure—and you would still be yourself. Jase Miller. As, if every one of my father's plantations burned tomorrow, I would still be 'Melia." She stared boldly into Jase's eyes. "'Melia, who knows what she wants."

Jase took her in his arms and drew her closer. "What do you want, Miss 'Melia?" he asked.

"I want for certain," she said, "and for ever." He pressed his mouth to hers before she could say more.

23.

The appearance of the Colchian fleet

Jase, some hours later, decided to return to *Arcola* and make certain the specie transfer was going as scheduled. He was in the parlor, buttoning his jacket, when he looked out the window and saw his lookout running to the house. He ran to the hall and opened the door. "Sir!" one shouted. "Yankees! Yankee gunboats!"

"Run to the boat!" Jase said. "Tell Chief Tyrus!"

Jase ran to the landing and saw, parading before his eyes, most of the Federal strength on the river. There were four Eads ironclads, black and beetle-shaped on the water, and a pair of lean Ellet rams. A commodore's pendant flew from one of the ironclads, so that meant Flag Officer Davis was attending to this matter himself. Led by the rams, the Federal squadron came down the river in a long line, then neatly anchored bow and stern close to the Mississippi shore.

Jase watched the squadron through binoculars and wondered what Davis had in mind. The Yanks were looking for *Arcola,* he reckoned, but if they knew where she was hiding, why were they anchored peacefully across the river? The Yankee crews were deploying awnings and walking casually on the casemates. Rowboats carried visitors from one boat to the next.

Davis had just decided to spend the night here, apparently. Maybe they were waiting for word from downriver, from that ram they'd sent ahead.

Jase returned to the house. 'Melia sat in a tall cane chair—one of her father's—on the front porch, her feet kicking casually a few inches above the floorboards. "I don't think they're coming," he said, "but I'd better get to *Arcola,* just in case."

"Should I go with you?"

"You'll be more comfortable here. I'll send for you if we have to get steam up."

She looked up at him, a lazy smile on her lips. "I hope you come visit tonight, Captain Miller."

"In the morning sow thy seed," Jase thought, "and in the evening withhold not thy hand." He tipped his straw hat. "Miss 'Melia," he said, and returned to his ironclad.

Chief Tyrus had manned the ten-inch Dahlgren forward, but kept the transfer of the currency going. Every time the sling carried a load of gold to the ironclad, it returned full of the ram's pig-iron ballast, which was promptly flung into the water, where it now formed a modest island.

"Shall we get steam up, sir?" Tyrus asked.

Jase looked up at the tall stacks and thought of the clouds of black coal smoke that would mark their position. "I don't think so," Jase said. "They're anchored on the far side of the river. No point in provoking a fight unless we have to."

"Are they blockading us?"

"I don't guess they know we're here. I expect they'll move off tomorrow. If they steam back upriver, we'll have avoided them. If they go down, then we'll have a scrap, but I don't figure we'll be any worse off than we are now." He looked at Tyrus. "How's our money?"

"The more we dig, the more we find," Tyrus said. "There doesn't seem to be any end to that cave."

Jase grinned. "What a damn shame," he said.

Tyrus seemed aggrieved. "There's tons of the stuff. I wish they'd left the silver in the vaults."

Jase put his hand on Tyrus' shoulder. "We'll give the government the scrawny white money," he said. "And fill our personal pockets with gold."

He went aboard *Arcola* to visit the money in the bilges. Euphemism stood over the growing pile, a notebook in his hand. "I've been keeping an inventory, sir," he said. "We have replaced twenty tons of the ballast."

Coal could be transferred by shovel at eight tons per hour, Jase thought. This was going to take longer.

"Very good, lieutenant," Jase said, looking down at the bags. *Twenty tons,* he thought, and more to come. He felt a tingle in the hand that had plucked gold double-eagles from their bag. He could still taste 'Melia on his lips.

If he listened carefully, he could hear a rich future singing in his blood.

24.
The sacrifice of Apsyrtus

Jase posted another pair of lookouts on the point near Helius to keep watch in the night, and brought 'Melia her supper on a tin tray. He found her still sitting on the porch, her feet swinging in the twilight, a cup of whisky-and-water still in her hand.

"Very good of you," she said, "to consider my hunger."

After midnight a thundering knock at the front door woke Jase and 'Melia from sleep. He rolled away from 'Melia and reached for his clothing, and was pulling his shirt over his head when he heard the running footsteps of a servant on the stair.

"Miss!" the old woman called. "Officers to see you! Yankee officers!"

Jase's heart gave a lurch, and his hand froze on his boot-tops. His sidearm was downstairs, in the parlor. He'd forgotten it there.

"Tell them I'll be down in a minute!" 'Melia called. Then, whispering in his ear, "Dress quickly. I'll show you the back stair."

"I don't have my pistol."

"They're not here for you, I'm sure."

Jase drew on his clothing, but carried his boots in his hand so that the Federals wouldn't hear him on the stair. 'Melia made sure the curtains were drawn, then struck a match and lit a candle. She put on a plain gray house dress, then combed her hair as Jase, hands suddenly clumsy, buttoned the dress up the back.

"I wonder if the house is surrounded," Jase said.

"Hide at the bottom of the back stair. Don't run unless you must."

She turned, gave him a fierce kiss, lips driving into his. "Don't worry," she said. "I will deal with them."

'Melia took his hand with cool fingers, led him to the back stair and down. She showed him the back door, then walked with the candle toward the front hall, leaving Jase alone in the warm velvet darkness, his boots in his hand. His heart throbbed as loud as *Arcola*'s triple-expansion engines.

He heard a murmur of voices from the front hall, then the opening of doors as 'Melia took the others to the parlor. Her voice rang clearly down the back hall to Jase's hiding place. "I wish you had confined your visits to a civilized hour . . . *Major*." There was particular venom invested in the last word. When the man spoke in answer, Jase thought he knew why. The major's voice was as Southern as his own.

"My duties forbade an earlier visit," he said. "And I would not have come at all, but I saw a light through the trees. I knew this place had been abandoned, and I became curious."

"I showed no light," 'Melia said, truthfully enough. "It must have been the servants."

"We are looking for a rebel ram," the major said. "It has been reported in these waters."

'Melia's laugh was a little shrill. "A ram? No. I came here by submarine boat."

There was a moment of silence, and then the major spoke again. Though his tones were soft, they froze Jase's blood.

"Tell me," the major said. "Where is the money?"

'Melia's answer was scornful. "I have some coins in my pockets. You Yankees may take them, as you've taken everything else."

"We know who took the money from Memphis before it fell," the major went on. "We know that you were with him. But there's been no sign of it since. Or the boat that carried it away."

There were a few shocked seconds before 'Melia composed an answer. "You can hardly blame the boat for staying out of your clutches. And the money, of course, was taken South."

"You forget," the major said, "that we read your papers. If tens of millions had been spirited out of Memphis just as the city fell and given to the Confederate government, don't you think the papers would have boasted of it? Especially as there was so little else for your press to boast about? Don't you think there would have been headlines ten inches high?"

Jase felt sweat trickle down his face. 'Melia gave a laugh. "Perhaps Father has it, then. Maybe he's got a pile of gold on one of his plantations."

The major's answer was quite serious. "What we haven't been able to work out, you see," he said, "is why the enemy ram came *north*. There are no Rebel military operations in progress for it to support. It can't attack any of our bases by itself, and it would be suicidal for the ram to attack our whole squadron without support. *So why is it here?*"

"I'm afraid our government does not consult me before it dispatches its ships," 'Melia said.

"The ram had to have come up the river for a *reason,*" the major insisted. "And when I saw the light at Helius tonight, it occurred to me that the only possible reason was the money. Sixty or seventy million dollars that seem to have gone missing between Memphis and Vicksburg."

'Melia laughed again. "Search the house and grounds," she said. "See if you find a ram in the garden."

Jase froze at the invitation.

"Where is the money?" the major asked.

"Let me fix you some tea," 'Melia said, "and we can continue this . . . fascinating conversation."

"I don't want your tea, 'Melia," the major said. "I've come for the money, and I mean to have it."

There was a moment's silence, and then Jase heard, clear as a striking bell, the double click of a revolver being cocked. Jase froze in horror.

The shot was loud as a cannon. Then more shots, a regular fusillade. Jase dropped his boots and ran down the hall to the parlor. When he came in he saw, through air blue with gunsmoke, 'Melia holding Jase's pistol in her hand, with a young man wearing a major's oak leaves lying stretched in his blood before her. Another man in the uniform of a lieutenant was leaning against the wall, red spurting from his torn neckcloth as he clawed at the flap of his holster with blood-slicked fingers. 'Melia's revolver clicked on an empty chamber.

Jase clubbed the standing man in the face with his fist. The man slid down the wall, and Jase pulled the wounded man's revolver from his holster as he lay there, a look of terror on his face as he watched his artery fountain his heart's blood onto the parlor carpet.

"Get your boots." 'Melia's voice was strangely calm. "Let us go."

Jase's head whirled. 'Melia took him by the arm and drew him into the back hall. She returned to the parlor, picked up the oil lamp from its table, the lamp with the horseman inscribed on its delicate glass reservoir, and flung it onto the carpet between the two Yankees. Glass shattered. Flaming oil rolled over the carpet in a wave.

She took him to the back stair. He pulled on his boots with nerveless fingers. And then 'Melia opened the back door and gestured into the night.

"The boat's crew," Jase managed. "They would have come with a boat's crew. They may have heard the shots."

"All the more reason to leave quickly. They won't search for us at night."

They fled across the overgrown fields by starlight. By the time they reached the fence line, a bright glow radiated behind them, the fire catching hold of the old frame building.

"My God," Jase gasped. "My God, they will start searching for the treasure. They know it's here!"

Fire glittered in 'Melia's eyes as she gazed at the burning house. "They don't know the gold is anywhere nearby," she said. "Or *Arcola* either. What you heard was the—the *major's* private theory. He'd just worked it all out, and he rowed across the river to boast about it to my face."

"You can't be certain of that." Jase said.

"I am. He wouldn't have told his superiors, not until he'd proved to himself that he was right. I imagine he came to Helius expecting to find me there, or maybe my father."

Jase stared at her. "You knew him?" he said.

"Of course." Her glittering eyes looked into his. "He was my brother."

25.

Phalerus the Archer maketh a discovery

Arcola's crew stood to their guns at dawn, and waited for the Yankees who did not come. Burning Helius was a pillar of smoke on the northwest horizon. Jase sent out Faren Smith and a party of armed sailors as scouts, and they reported Yankees crawling all over the plantation, but none ventured into the thick wilderness that surrounded the cotton fields.

"See?" 'Melia said, when Jase told her. "A pair of officers went ashore on some kind of private adventure, and it went wrong. Maybe they were assassinated by partisans, maybe they set fire to the place and were caught in the blaze because they were drunk. The servants know nothing of any importance. No one is thinking of *gold.*" She leaned close, and a shiver went up his spine as he felt her tongue taste his throat. "No one but us. For certain and forever."

Faren Smith also found Jase's two lookouts, who maintained that they'd been watching the Yankee squadron all night, but had missed the little rowboat on its approach because they weren't looking for something so small. Jase, certain they'd fallen asleep on watch, had them gagged and tied to a pair of trees, and let them sit there till nightfall.

The Federal squadron moved off around midday, heading south. So *Arcola* would have to meet them on the river if she was to make Vicksburg.

The loading of the money went on. All fifty tons of pig iron ballast had been replaced by bags of cash, and all the railroad iron ballast, too. Jase emptied provision casks and re-stowed them filled with Indian-head silver dollars and golden eagles.

By unspoken agreement, everyone had forgotten about Jase's elaborate plans for safeguarding the treasure. Let the crewmen fill their pockets: there was plenty more. Toward mid-afternoon they ran out of places to stow the money and began to stack bags of cash between the guns.

"We're low on our marks," Chief Tyrus said. "I hope we aren't so deep in the water that we can't get out of this chute."

"Perhaps we should rename her the *Floating Mint,*" suggested Euphemism.

"Shut the hell up, lieutenant!" Jase snarled. His officers looked at each other. Jase stalked away, walked for a moment beneath the cottonwoods until he could calm his singing nerves. He heard footsteps behind him, saw Faren Smith approaching, the Whitworth still carried in the crook of his arm.

"Can you spare a moment, Captain?" he asked. "There's something I think you should see."

The gunner led Jase along the path toward Helius, but stopped before he reached the point where the hardwood forest opened up into cotton fields. "I found this when I was scouting the Yankees this morning, sir," he said, and took Jase off the track, through the trees. "Look here," he said.

The bodies were not far off the path, the bones lying limp in their clothing. Jase counted five skulls, though there may have been others underneath. Though scavengers had picked the bones clean of flesh, the clothing was not badly weathered, and the bones were still bright in the mottled sunlight.

Jase's mouth was dry. "The crew of *Felicity,*" he said.

Smith nodded. "Reckon so," he said.

A memory floated into Jase's mind, 'Melia addressing her brother. *Let me fix you some tea.* Her brother, the Yankee major, had known better than to accept the offer. She had brought refreshing drinks of that wholesome Helius spring water to the crew of *Felicity* as they finished concealing her treasure, but when they'd died she hadn't been able to drag them very far off the trail. Then she'd cast their steamboat adrift in the chute, and let the rocks take it.

Jase looked at the gunner. "I wouldn't tell any of the other crewmen about this," he said.

"I won't," Smith said. "But I don't plan to let that young lady doctor me none."

Jase looked down at the pile of bodies. Fresh green growth sprang between their bones.

"Me, either," he said.

26.

The Argonauts confronteth the Dragon's Teeth

In late afternoon *Arcola* began raising steam, and black smoke poured from her stacks and drifted over the treeline. There was plenty of money left in the cave, millions probably, but no place left to put it—no place unless the ironclad was to completely lose her identity as a warship, unable to fire the guns because there was too much cash in the way. Before casting off Jase ordered the cave sealed up again, and closed in with turves of grass. Someone would come for the money sooner or later. Jase reckoned 'Melia would get to it before the Confederate government did, but concluded the matter was no business of his.

With leadsmen chanting from the nearly submerged bows, Dashiell and Jase maneuvered *Arcola* out of the chute behind Island No. 68 during the last half-hour of daylight. The boat lay deep in the water, with the Mississippi creaming high on the casemate, and responded sluggishly to the helm. The boilers would need more coal, Jase thought, to keep her moving in this state, though at least the river current was in their favor, and would add three or four knots to their speed.

Drive like Jehu, Jase thought. He rang the engine room for full ahead, determined to make as many miles downriver as time would permit. Leaving Dashiell and Faren Smith in the pilot house, with orders to keep their eyes skinned for the Yankee flotilla, Jase dropped to the gun deck.

Bags of money were stacked in every corner. Crewmen sat and reclined on them and seemed dazed less by weariness than by dreams of wealth and luxury. Miss 'Melia's hammock swung over a small mountain of wealth. Lt. Euphemism, Jase saw, was attending her.

He returned Euphemism's salute and tipped his hat to 'Melia. "Are you comfortable, miss?"

"Oh yes. Lt. . . . Euphemism," smiling, "has been most attentive."

"Thank you, miss," Euphemism said. He turned to Jase. "Sir?" Euphemism said. "Your people from the *Bee* have been enlightening me as regards the custom of prize money. They tell me that the captain's share is three-twentieths, and that the lieutenants split two-twentieths between them. That the warrant and petty officers split another five-twentieths, and the ordinary crewmen split half the total."

Jase smiled. "You'll find that the ordinary shellback can calculate his share of prize money faster than he can drink his whisky ration."

'Melia's eyes shone. "Your share is three-twentieths, and mine is equal to yours, but three-twentieths of *what?* Most of the money," sighing, "is pledged to the government."

"True," Jase said, "but I reckon Jeff Davis won't have too many objections if the government's share comes to 90 percent."

Calculations flickered behind 'Melia's eyes. "If we recovered fifty million out of the total, say, that would give us five million as the crew's share. And three-twentieths of that would be seven hundred and fifty thousand, all in gold!" Her white teeth flashed as she laughed. "You're nearly a millionaire, captain! And so am I."

"And the ordinary sailors would have close to twenty thousand apiece," Jase said. "But remember that we'll going to have to get past an entire Yankee squadron before we can count the money."

Plus, Jase thought, he'd probably have to rent a railroad car to get his share away. His share alone, in gold, would weigh over a ton and a half. He'd worked it out with paper and pencil before he'd ever left Vicksburg.

There was a little frown on Euphemism's face. "But surely, sir, even if the crew is entitled to a share, it would have to be awarded by a prize court."

"Prize courts are mighty slow, Lieutenant," Jase said. "Those of us from the old *Mobile* are still waiting for the prize courts to deliver the money owed us for the six prizes we took last year. And even if the prize court ruled in a timely way, they wouldn't pay in real money, just in notes. So," he smiled, "we'll just take our share ahead of time, and save the court's time."

Euphemism's frown deepened. "I don't know if I can approve of this trifling with the Government's money," he said.

"Strictly speaking," Jase said, "the money isn't the Government's, it belongs to depositors in Tennessee banks. Though it looks as if Richmond will get 90 percent of it."

Euphemism seemed oblivious to the glares the nearby crewmen were giving him. "If it's private money," he continued, "that's even less reason to give large sums to the soldiers and sailors whose job is to defend the money, not help themselves to shares. And even if the prize court rules in your favor, I don't see," turning apologetically to 'Melia, "I don't see how a civilian is entitled to a share as large as that of the captain."

"Be not righteous over much," Jase said, "as the preacher sayeth."

'Melia put a hand on Euphemism's arm. "Be generous," she said. "I could have kept it all, you know."

Euphemism had the decency to look embarrassed.

"All was arranged ahead of time," Jase said, "with Secretary Mallory and the Secretary of the Treasury."

"I have read the Constitution, sir," Euphemism said. "No member of the cabinet has the authority to confiscate or give away private monies, nor to award prize money without participation of the courts. It's plain illegal, sir."

"Seceding from the United States was illegal, too, or so I hear," Jase said.

"Sir," Euphemism said stiffly, "I must beg you not to confuse our sacred Cause with a plundering expedition."

Jase had never quite as clearly seen how closely Euphemism resembled those rich young idiots he'd known at Annapolis. "Oh," he snarled. "Sorry. I'm sure Jeff Davis never planned to make money as a result of secession. Heaven forbid."

Euphemism pressed his lips together whitely. Then he rose to attention and clicked his heels. "Captain Miller," he said, "I am obliged to inform you that if you continue with this illegal act, I will formally protest with General Van Dorn, with the governor and attorney general of Mississippi, and with the government in Richmond. I will also inform the newspapers of your actions. My family is not without influence, sir. I beg you to keep this in mind."

Jase looked at him. "Do as you please, Lieutenant," he said.

Euphemism saluted, turned, marched aft. Jase let out a long breath. "Damned idiot," he said.

'Melia looked after the lieutenant with worried eyes. "Let me talk to him," she said. "I'll try to bring him to reason."

He looked into the dark eyes that shone gold in the light of the battle lanterns. "It is the bright day that brings forth the adder," he thought, "And that craves wary walking."

"Good luck," he said, and returned to the pilot house.

Arcola steamed ahead all night, making seven or eight knots plus any distance contributed by the current. Jase planned to be off Greenville by morning. The last news was that Greenville was nominally Confederate, at least insofar as the Yanks had not bothered to capture the place—and if the Federals had left any coal there, Jase planned to shift it to *Arcola*'s bunkers. Even wood would do.

The rising sun glared into Jase's eyes as *Arcola* steamed around Rowdy Bend on the last S-turn before Greenville, and it was a moment before he could shade his eyes against the sun and see the dark slablike silhouettes of the Eads ironclads lined up on the glittering water, black smoke boiling from their stacks as they raised steam.

"Yankees!" Dashiell gasped, then called down to the wheel. "Hard a-port! Call for more turns!"

"Belay that," Jase said, the words somehow squeezing past the heart that suddenly thundered in his throat. "Stand to quarters! Signal the engine room for all possible speed!" He turned to the plump pilot who stared at him in horror. "They have to've seen us," he said. "If we run upstream, we're just farther from help. You get down, now, and find yourself some shelter."

He followed the pilot through the pilot house roof while the men jumped to their places on the deck below. He gazed at the enemy flotilla through the armored slits.

There the enemy were, half a mile away, moored in a line, bow and stern, near the Mississippi bank of the river. He hoped they hadn't got up enough steam to maneuver. He'd better play it safe, keep close to the enemy so that they couldn't get up speed to ram him.

At least *Arcola* traveled with its guns loaded and run out. And the crew couldn't stray far from their stations, because there was nowhere else to go.

A trumpet call rang through the air from the enemy squadron. So much for the hope that *Arcola* hadn't been seen.

"Stand by the port battery. Bow gun, fire at will."

The Dahlgren thundered out almost as an echo to his words—Smith was good at his work. Jase blinked at the gunsmoke that swirled through the pilot house. From ahead he heard a booming clang as the ten-inch solid struck iron.

"Starboard your helm. Steady. Rudder amidships." He was aiming for the nearest enemy stern. The air intakes howled as *Arcola* built speed.

A quarter mile. Half a cable. The Dahlgren roared out again, and Jase heard the satisfying crack of splintering armor.

"Port your helm! Hold it! Now amidships!"

Arcola turned sluggishly away from the enemy's stern, white water creaming along the casemate. Jase didn't dare ram the enemy—it would slow down the battle too much, give the Yankees time to recover or maneuver. He'd be happy enough if they didn't ram his own boat.

"Port battery—fire as you bear!"

The thirty-two-pounders roared as *Arcola* swept past the anchored enemy. The Federals were so surprised they managed to fire only a single gun—Jase felt the ram shudder—and then they were past, and Jase stared at the next enemy, only a cable away.

The second ironclad managed to fire its whole broadside as *Arcola* sped alongside, the guns hammering at point-blank range. Crashes filled the air as armor shrieked, oak cracked, and the casemate shuddered to impact.

Arcola steamed past all four ironclads, dealing and receiving punishment as she went. Ahead were three Ellet rams: unprotected, unarmed wooden vessels that depended on speed and impact in battle.

"Mr. Smith! I want those rams smashed up!" Jase ordered. They were the only Federal vessels fast enough to catch *Arcola*.

Arcola fired a full broadside into each ram, solid shot mixed with explosive shell from the seven-inch Brooke rifle. This left one ram satisfactorily in flames, the other two riddled. *Arcola* swept on while the crewmen cheered.

"*Howl! Ye ships of Tarshish!*" Jase exulted, waving a fist from the pilot house. He looked aft as *Arcola* steamed around the next bend and saw that the enemy boats were starting to get under way, white water boiling beneath their paddleboxes.

It was going to be a race. Yankee persistence against the scant fuel remaining in *Arcola*'s bunkers.

Jase slowed the boat to save fuel, called for Dashiell to steer the boat past

Greenville, then dropped to the gun deck. A knot of crewmen were clustered around some people lying prone on the planks. Jase pushed his way through the cluster, saw four crewmen lying bleeding. The surgeon's mate and Miss 'Melia crouched over them. Their faces and hands had been lacerated badly, their flesh gouged and scarlet. Jase had never seen anything like it. "What happened here?" he asked.

"Gold." One of the crewmen gave a weary laugh, and Jase saw it was Euphemism. "We've been shot full of gold."

One of the enemy solids had smashed into the casemate opposite a place where bags of money had been stacked. The force of the shot had transmitted itself through the casemate and into the stack of specie, flinging gold quarter-eagles through the casemate like shrapnel and mowing down half the crew of one of the broadside guns.

"The wounds aren't serious, I think," 'Melia said. "We'll need some stitches. And I'll make up poultices to aid healing."

Jase told the wounded to consider themselves lucky that their injuries weren't any worse, and made his way to the boiler room, where he asked Chief Tyrus to give an estimate of fuel. "It's a hundred miles or more to Vicksburg," he said. "Ten hours or more of steaming. Can we do it?"

Tyrus considered for a moment, then shook his head. "No, sir. I might be able to stretch it to eight hours, maybe a little more. But that's all."

Jase rubbed his chin. "Sir?" Tyrus said. "There is one possibility for saving the boat."

"Yes?"

"Throw overboard the guns and the stores. And the . . . the ballast."

Jase just looked at him. Tyrus swallowed. "Just a suggestion, sir," he said.

"Keep the engines at highest possible fuel efficiency," Jase said. "I'll let you know if I need more turns."

"Sir."

Jase returned to the gun deck. The wounded crewmen were sitting pillowed on sacks of specie, joking nervously with their friends as the surgeon's mate stitched up their wounds. 'Melia crouched beneath the breech of a gun, her medical bag propped open on the gun's wooden carriage.

"Comfrey poultices," she said. "They should help the wounded." Her hand made a pass toward a small stoppered phial on the deck, but she failed to reach it. "Would you hand me that bottle, please?"

Jase picked up the bottle, saw the words "yellow jessamine" written on the paper label. It looked like some kind of root pickled in alcohol.

He knew what comfrey looked like. This wasn't it. Even in Latin.

A cold wind chilled his spine. He held the bottle to 'Melia. "For the lieutenant?" he asked.

Her hands closed round the bottle. Her dark eyes looked up into his. "I don't see any other solution," she said. "Do you?"

Jase licked his lips. "No," he said. "I don't."

"They do but jest," he thought, "poison in jest; no offense i' the world."

27.
The enemy pursueth the Argonauts

The black coal smoke that marked the enemy flotilla fell out of sight astern, but Jase had no doubt that they were pursuing as fast as their situation permitted. He and Dashiell conferred as to a place to conceal the ram, preferably somewhere where they had a chance to offload the gold. "I'll try to get you behind Cottonwood Bar," he said. "That's near Illawara. There's a road that runs south from there to Desoto Point, across the river from Vicksburg." There were other places where he could try to hide *Arcola,* but nowhere north of Cottonwood Bar offered a road that could take the treasure to the interior.

Chief Tyrus managed to stretch the coal just that far. *Arcola* steamed in broad daylight through the Delta no-man's-land that it had stealthily skulked up at night, and Jase found the strange flat country mesmerizing, the long wild shores with their cottonwoods and mangroves, their egrets and circling herons.

It was nearly virgin wilderness, the only signs of human habitation being the landings, and sometimes the chimneys, that marked the plantations. Life and commerce was carried on entirely by water, with few or no roads to carry anyone or any thing more than an hour's walk from the Mississippi.

River commerce had dried up as the Yankees came south, and the country had died with it. The plantations were deserted by their owners, who had either gone to Vicksburg or gone for a soldier. The slaves marked time under their overseers and waited for liberation at the hands of the Yankees. There was no one to maintain the levees, and before very long the entire country would return to a state of nature.

Jase paid visits to the wounded as the day went on. Everyone but Lt. Euphemism seemed to be doing well. At first he only coughed a bit, as if the powder smoke had caught in his throat; and he joked about his poor sea-legs that were making him feel sick to the stomach. But then his face flushed red and he swayed on his feet. 'Melia made him lie in her hammock and tended him carefully, gave him willow bark in case of fever.

By the time *Arcola,* down to its last few scrapings of coal-dust from the bunkers, made its careful way up the chute behind Cottonwood Bar, Euphemism had gone cold and clammy, and gasped for breath. He was unable to leave the hammock. 'Melia and the surgeon's mate put their heads together and decided to give him poppy in order to make him more comfortable.

As soon as the ram was moored in the sheltered chute behind Cottonwood Bar, Jase released Chief Tyrus and the engine room crew from duty, and gave them a bag of silver dollars. "Get to Illawara," he said. "Rent or buy every wagon you can find, and bring them all as close to this place as you can."

"Cotton wagons, sir," Dashiell offered. "The planters hereabouts will all have a great many cotton wagons. To bring their cotton to the gins, sir, you see."

"Bring them," Jase told Tyrus, and began the business of setting up lines and blocks to carry the gold to shore.

Faren Smith and the crew of the Brooke rifle remained at their stations, the rifle trained out over the Mississippi at the bottom of the chute. The rest of the crew began transferring the money. Jase had a pair of lines rove through tackles ashore, with a pair of slings on each, so that the gold could be moved quickly, one sling moving inland while the other traveled to the ram, and once ashore he set up a kind of bucket brigade to pass sacks of gold into the cover of the trees. With over a hundred pairs of hands at the work, the unloading went swiftly, far more swiftly than it had taken the crew to dig the money out of the hole and transport it along the narrow woodland trail to the ironclad.

Lt. Euphemism continued to decline. He lay in the hammock coughing continually, barely able to speak, growing weaker by the hour. 'Melia tended him carefully. Jase saw the expression of tenderness and concern in her eyes as she nursed her patient, and a chill went up his back. After a while Jase couldn't bear the sight any longer, and went ashore to supervise the unloading.

He hurried things along, but it didn't go quickly enough. Two hours after *Arcola* moored, Jase heard the thudding engines and thrashing paddle wheels of the Federal squadron. He jumped for one of the buoy lines and swung hand-over-hand back to the ram, then ran up the casemate and stood peering aft.

Davis and his squadron came into sight below the chute, steaming in their line to Vicksburg, the four huge ironclads led by one of the light, fast Ellet rams.

Jase clenched his teeth and willed the Yank lookouts to gaze only downriver, to keep their attention focused on what was in front instead of the rust-red river monster that crouched in hiding behind them.

Exultation blazed in his heart as the Federals kept their line, as the lead ram began its long curve to port that would take it into the next bend—and then one of the ironclads fired a gun, the hollow thud following the flash and spurt of smoke by a long half-second, and the Eads boat began a turn, swinging out of line, presenting its broadside, then its bow guns as its side paddles drove it back up the river, as it stood directly for *Arcola*. The other boats, too, began to make lumbering turns.

Jase gazed down at *Arcola,* at his beautiful boat. Behold a ram, he thought, caught in a thicket by its horns.

Jase turned to the crewmen swinging sacks of specie from hand to hand. "Smartly, there!" he said. "They've spotted us!"

He entered the casemate and went aft to where Faren Smith waited beside the seven-inch rifle. "At least we outrange them," Smith said, and patted the breech. "Leave it to me, sir. I'll keep 'em at a distance while you finish the job."

Jase looked over his shoulder, where Euphemism's hammock swung between a pair of the broadside guns. "Let's get the lieutenant ashore," he said, then looked at 'Melia. "And you, miss," he said.

'Melia quietly reached for her bags, but Jase heard Euphemism's weak voice. "No," he said. "No, the Yankees are coming. I must take my station."

Euphemism tried weakly to climb from his hammock, but 'Melia approached and held him down with very little effort. Jase approached the hammock, looked down at Euphemism's drawn face, the white protruding eyes that glimmered wetly in the light of the open gunports. A shiver ran up his spine at the sight.

"Your station's ashore, Lieutenant," Jase said. "You're assigned to guard the gold."

Euphemism shook his head. "No," he said. "Must fight my guns." But then coughing began to rack him, and Jase signed to the crew to untie his hammock and carry him to the lines that could swing him ashore.

"Hurry, there!" he shouted at the people on the other line, filling their sling with sacks of money. He didn't want to watch Euphemism being hustled out a gunport, so he stalked aft again, peered out the aft port at the advancing Federals thrashing against the current toward *Arcola.*

"We're at long range," Smith remarked. "I could probably hit them from here, but I doubt I'd do any damage."

Jase thought about it for a moment. "Open fire now," he decided. "I want a lot of smoke to hide what we're doing."

Smith nodded, peered over the sights for a moment, and tugged the lanyard. Like a wild beast flinging itself at the bars of its cage, the Blake rifle lunged back into the casemate till it slammed against the limits of its tackles. The eerie receding wail of the spinning shell was followed, a scant few heartbeats later, by the clang of the seven-inch bolt slamming home on Federal iron. The gun crew cheered as they closed the iron shutters over the port and jumped to reload the huge metal beast. They opened the shutters and hauled it again to the port, the crew almost horizontal as they dragged the gun along the deck, Faren Smith riding the carriage forward with his thumb placed over the touch hole to prevent accidental firing.

Jase stuck his head out a side port so that he could watch both the unloading and the approaching Yankees. The lead Federal ironclad appeared unchanged except for the fact that the crew were slamming closed the iron shutters on the forward gunports. Their own smoothbores were out of range, and they were taking care that no chance shot got through an open port.

Smith got off a dozen more shots, all hits, before the lead ironclad's forward ports opened and its forward battery of four nine-inch Dahlgren smoothbores rolled out. They went off in a regular salvo, and Jase ducked back into the casemate before he could lose his head to the solid iron shot that were suddenly tearing the air apart outside. He waited inside the port, heart hammering, for the sound of a shot striking home, but heard nothing.

The Yankees had missed completely. And, as if to mock their efforts, Smith ran the Blake rifle out the port and fired one accurate shot in reply, the seven-inch bolt bounding off the Yankee casemate with the sound of a ringing bell.

Jase waited for another Federal salvo—another four misses—before ducking out the port and traveling hand-over-hand along one of the lines that had been run to shore. He dropped to the ground and sprinted along the line of toiling men—the enemy salvos ripping the sky overhead seemed to have accelerated their efforts—till he reached the growing pile of money, where he saw a pair of big muledrawn wagons being brought up through the boggy ground. Chief Tyrus swung down from one of the wagons and ran forward to report.

"Sir," he said. "The whole countryside is bringing their wagons. I'll start loading these two as soon as we bring them up."

"Belay that. I want your people unloading the ram. Once we get the gold ashore, we can worry about getting it onto the wagons."

"Ay, sir."

Jase returned to *Arcola* and its fight with the Yankee squadron. For the remainder of the afternoon Faren Smith continued his unequal contest against the enemy. The Federals couldn't get all their boats positioned to fire up the narrow chute, and had to settle for using two at a time, the rest of their flotilla hovering behind, waiting their moment to attack. Their firing improved, and before long a nine-inch solid slammed into *Arcola* every few minutes, bounding off Argus McBride's railroad iron with a shriek, a clang, and a shower of sparks. The stacks and air intakes were riddled, and one of the aft gunport shutters was disabled by a lucky shot. The enemy's howling iron solids killed a half-dozen Confederates engaged in transferring money, and several times cut the lines by which the gold was being taken ashore.

Smith, for his part, managed to drive the first Federal ironclad out of the fight, but it was promptly replaced by another, with fresher crews and unexpended stocks of ammunition.

After two hours of the pounding Jase could hear the armor beginning to break, the oaken beams that supported the casemate cracking with each hit. The casemate filled with smoke, heat, and noise, the boom of the Blake and the crash of Yankee shot.

Just hold out till nightfall, Jase thought. They have tied me to a stake, I cannot fly.

At dusk he saw that one of the Eads boats was moving upstream, and despair howled through his veins as he realized why. The Yank was going to enter the chute at the top of Cottonwood Bar and catch *Arcola* between two fires.

But night fell before the Federal boat came down. Apparently they were wary about feeling their way down the chute at night. The Yankees withdrew to repair damage and wait till morning. Smith, staggering with weariness, reported to Jase that the Blake rifle had only five rounds left.

"I could put one of the thirty-two-pounders in the aft port, sir," he said. "Plenty of ammunition for those."

Jase shook his head. He felt as if he were already in a kind of mourning.

"You've done well," he said. "Get something to eat, then help move the gold."

The last bags of specie came ashore around midnight. *Arcola* bobbed high in the water, completely unballasted. Jase considered his situation. In the morning, the Yankees would attack down both ends of the Cottonwood Bar chute, catching *Arcola* between two fires. Jase didn't have enough coal even to get up steam, let alone maneuver. The armor on the aft end of the casemate was about to cave in. His crew was exhausted, and the gold was ashore and would need guards.

He ordered all the guns loaded, double-shotted, and run out the ports. Then he ordered *Arcola* set on fire and had men stand by the lines to cast the ironclad adrift down the chute.

Maybe she'd take some Yankees with her when she blew up.

He stood by the bank as flame glowed from the iron monster's ports. He ordered the lines cast off, and watched as *Arcola* slowly gathered way, drifting stern-first for the Gulf of Mexico.

My God, he thought, she was a sweet boat. Done everything he asked, and more. Even now he wanted to put men aboard her and steam out to fight the Yanks, give *Arcola* a proper warship's funeral, the enemy's broadsides thundering like volleys fired over her grave.

Sadness rose in him like a tide. *His boat.* When she floated down the chute toward the enemy, she would take a piece of his heart with her.

He felt a hand on his arm and gave a little start of surprise.

"I'm sorry about your boat," 'Melia said.

He turned away from her, watched *Arcola* drift slowly away into the night. "She was a means to an end," he said.

"The lieutenant died two hours ago," 'Melia said. "It was very peaceful. I told him we'd beaten the Yankees, that they were running away."

"That was good of you," Jase said.

Her fingers tightened on his arm. "And now we're rich," she said. "And together. Forever."

Jase spat on the ground. "Let's get out of here," he said, "before it starts raining guns."

28.

The Golden Fleece is brought home in triumph

Harry Klee, Put-Up-Your-Dukes, and the crew of the *General Bee* met them in Vicksburg, after the money was ferried across the Mississippi under the guard of *Arcola*'s crew. During the night of the fog, *Bee,* without a pilot, had anchored out of the channel to wait for daylight. They'd heard *Arcola* steam past but hadn't dared to follow.

While trying to catch the ram the next morning, they'd blown a steam line, and while barely able to make turns had been surprised by an Ellet ram, probably the one that had passed *Arcola* in the night. *Bee* had been rammed amidships before her gunners could score a vital hit on the enemy, and the crew ended up floating down the Mississippi on the coal barge while *Bee* filled and sank.

So Jase's first *and* second command had been wrecked by the enemy. Jase figured he'd better stay off the water for a while.

In Vicksburg, Jase commissioned a train to take the specie inland along the Southern Mississippi Railroad. *Arcola*'s crew provided an escort. The train stopped at Jackson, then Meridian, where the money moved south along the Mobile & Ohio to Mobile.

The money crossed Mobile Bay by steamer, then headed east on the Mobile & Pensacola, then north on the Alabama & Florida to Montgomery. From there to Atlanta via the Montgomery & West Point, and the West Point & Atlanta.

At every stop detachments left the escort. Reliable men carried trunks and barrels to reliable places. Each crewman was assigned a place of return in order to collect his share. Jase left Miss 'Melia at Mobile, sitting atop a ton and a half of gold buried in the cellar of a modest house she'd bought with cash.

From Atlanta to Augusta, from Augusta to Charleston—tons of gold left the train at every stop—then to Florence, to Wilmington, to Goldsborough, and finally to Richmond, where—with army playing, and an honor guard at the salute—Jase and the crew of *Arcola* handed over to the Confederate treasury a sum somewhat in excess of forty-four million dollars. "There's more where that came from," Jase said. "We couldn't get it all."

"Would you care to go fetch it, Captain?" Secretary Benjamin asked. "We are able to afford to give you another boat."

"I believe my health requires a furlough," Jase told him.

The crew of *Arcola* were given discharges or long furloughs. Jase was promoted to captain and permitted to shake the papery hand of Jefferson Davis while a band played "Bonnie Blue Flag." He bought a civilian suit and took the train south to Charleston, the place of his birth, where he began to work at ways of investing his share of the money.

29.
Jason is King in Corinth

Jase hadn't given 'Melia an address at which he could be reached, had just told her that he'd write. And then not written.

He was not very surprised, though, five weeks after his arrival in Charleston, to step out of his new town home to find Miss 'Melia standing on the curb opposite, silhouetted by the sparkling waters of Charleston Bay. Small, in a modest brown dress, her eyes shaded by round smoked glass, the spectacles like the double bores of a shotgun aimed between his eyes.

It was not surprise, surely, that caused his heart to drop from his ribs, to stop his breath in his throat.

Jase crossed the street, touched his hat. "Miss 'Melia," he said.

"Captain." She had a walking stick in one hand, and her black medical bag in the other. She put both objects in one hand and put her free arm through his. "Shall we walk?"

"If you like."

They walked along the waterfront promenade. Gulls cawed overhead. The masts and funnels of ships, blockaded here for the length of the war, stood against the horizon in a black tangle.

"You didn't write," she said.

"It's been a busy time," Jase said.

"That is your new house, I believe? If your neighbors are not to be disbelieved?"

"Yes."

"You are spending freely? And no one questions it?"

"I tell them it's prize money from the cruise of the *Mobile*."

She sighed. "Alas. No such story is available to me."

"You're the daughter of a wealthy and prominent citizen. There is no reason why you should not spend money, and on any scale you like."

Her shotgun eyes turned to his. "People talk."

"Let them. What do you care?"

Poisons people, he thought, and worries about what the neighbors say.

She turned away, eyes scanning the bay. Then she stopped, turned to face him. "It was to be forever," she said. "Forever!"

"Miss 'Melia," he said, "what promises did I ever make you?"

"That woman in your house!" she said. "The one with the yellow hair and the two children. Who is she?"

"My wife."

Jase winced as her gloved hand gripped his arm. "You left me and married some stranger?"

He straightened, looked into the black lenses. "I've been married for seven years. The boy and girl are mine."

There was more to it than that, if he'd wanted to tell her, concerning how limited were the options of a young officer when he'd got a child on the daughter of a superior officer. How marriage brought a degree of patronage in an overcrowded service. How the patronage had gone North with his father-in-law, and left him with fewer options than ever.

Till now. Till he had a fortune in his hands.

"You promised!" she said. "You said it would be forever!"

"I promised you a share equal to mine," Jase said. "And I kept my promise."

Her chin trembled. "So I'm just a means to an end?" she said. "Like *Arcola?* Like Pendergas?"

"Just like I was a means to your end." he said. "Like your father served you. And Euphemism."

She leaned closer to him, the words hissing out. "*I killed a man for you!*"

Scorn forced a bitter laugh from his lips. "And the other men? The crew of the *Felicity?* Who'd you kill them for?"

The hand on his arm lost strength, and the color drained from her face. "They would have sold the secret to the Yankees," she said. "Or taken the money themselves." Her lips shivered, and her voice was weak.

"We have made a covenant with death," Jase said, "and with hell we are in agreement." He took her hand from his arm and separated himself from her. She clutched at her stick and medical bag with both hands, swayed on her feet.

"We got what we wanted, mostly," Jase said. "And what we didn't get, we can't have. We're too dangerous to be together." He raised his hat. "Keep well, Miss 'Melia."

He left her there on the waterfront, knuckles white as she clutched her medical bag, the gulls calling over head.

And he thought to himself, Thank God that's over at last. ○

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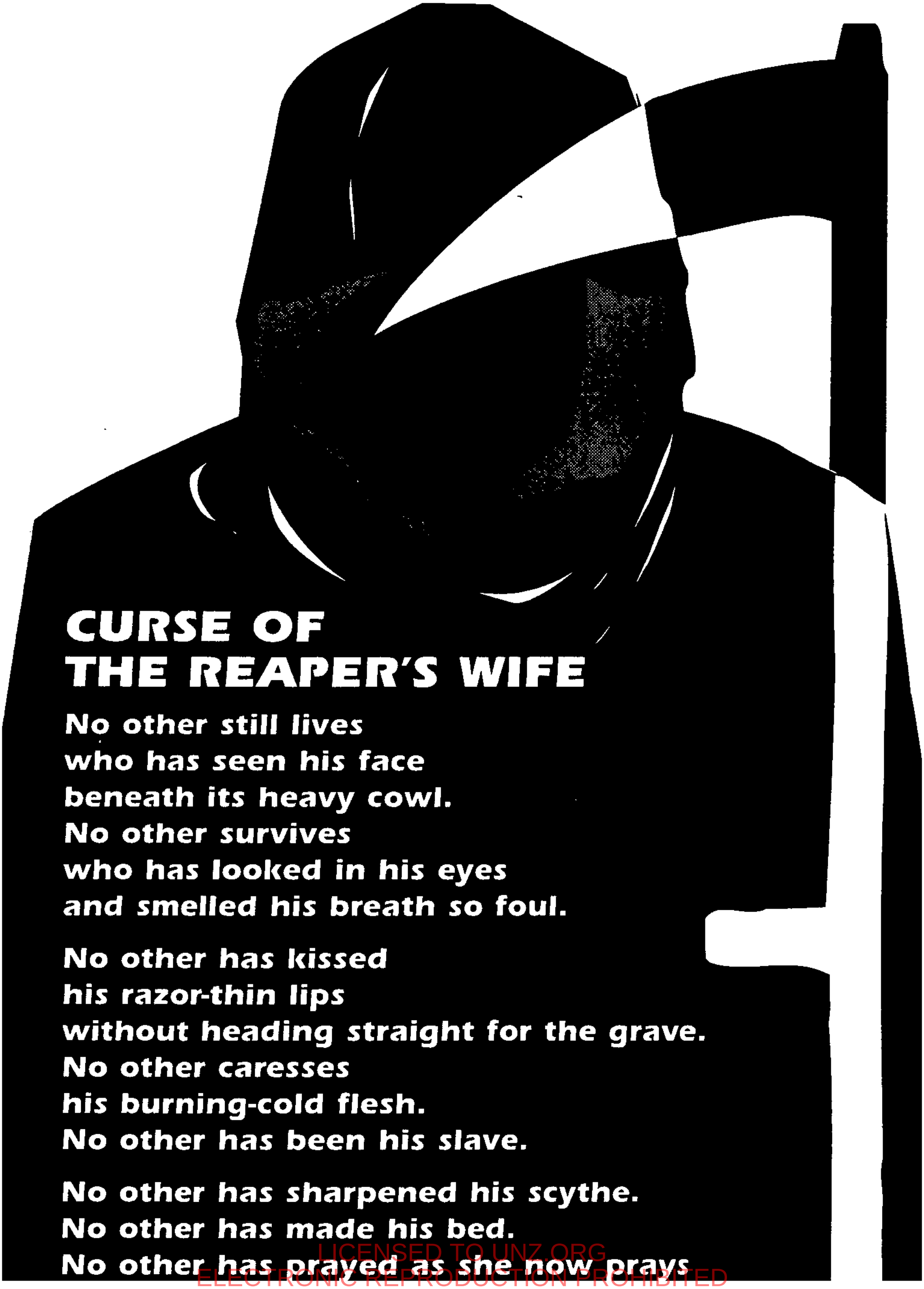

CURSE OF THE REAPER'S WIFE

No other still lives
who has seen his face
beneath its heavy cowl.
No other survives
who has looked in his eyes
and smelled his breath so foul.

No other has kissed
his razor-thin lips
without heading straight for the grave.
No other caresses
his burning-cold flesh.
No other has been his slave.

No other has sharpened his scythe.
No other has made his bed.
No other has prayed as she now prays

CLOSURE

THE BEST OF INTERZONE
Edited by David Pringle
St. Martin's, $25.95, ISBN 0-312-15063-6

IN THE GARDEN OF IDEN
by Kage Baker
Avon EOS, $5.99, ISBN 0-380-73179-7

THE ALIEN YEARS
by Robert Silverberg
Harper, $6.99, ISBN 0-061-05111-X

MISSION CHILD
by Maureen F. McHugh
Avon EOS, $20.00, ISBN 0-380-97456-8

COSM
by Gregory Benford
Avon, $6.99, ISBN 0-380-79052-1

FRENZETTA
by Richard Calder
Orbit, £5.99, ISBN 1-857-23683-1

While it may not really be true that "All's well that ends well," as witness, for example, the hideous carnage of the Second World War; it would be hard to deny that when it comes to literature at least, even otherwise highly enjoyable and well-written fiction is diminished as a whole if it ends badly.

What do I mean by fiction that "ends badly"?

A tale whose conclusion leaves readers feeling dissatisfied or worse, cheated, after they've read it, diminishing rather than enhancing what has gone before in retrospect.

If this seems like somewhat circular logic, well, the crafting of a well-satisfying conclusion, a thematic and dramatic destination at which to arrive, when they begin the telling of the tale. Many successful writers claim they usually do not, but this probably means not on a *conscious* level. Either their subconscious or the collective unconscious must be guiding them unerringly toward a closure they don't consciously see, or they're going to have to go back and re-write when they reach a successful one that surprises them in order to lead up to it.

Or the tale is probably not going to work.

"Closure" these days is a word much abused by psychobabblers, undertakers, and lawyers seeking larger awards for "mental anguish," but it still remains a literarily useful term, distinguishing the mere ending or denouement of a story from an ending that satisfies on a multiplicity of levels.

"Answer," by Fredric Brown, for example, is a very short story, almost a haiku, so perfect that it has passed into the general cultural patrimony and is seldom attributed to an individual writer. You probably know it.

All the computers in the world are linked together to form the ultimate computer. They plug it in, throw the switch, and ask the first question: "Is there a God?"

And a lightning bolt from the sky fuses the switch open and a great voice says:

Choose one:

(A): "There is!"

(B): "*Now* there is!"

(B) is Brown's ending, and that,

above, even one word can make a difference, even whether that word is *italicized* or not, though admittedly this is the ultimate extreme example. But the last line, or the last paragraph, is critical to the success of a short story, even at novelette length, more often than not.

One might dip at random into a good anthology to check out how endings do or do not work, and one couldn't do better than *The Best of Interzone,* edited by David Pringle. This consists of twenty-nine stories from the first fifteen years of the British magazine that was more or less started as a kind of literary successor to *New Worlds,* and has gently evolved into something which, while still open to experimental work, is not quite so aggressively dedicated to skating out there on the most extreme cutting edge.

So what Pringle has assembled is a collection of stories by the famous and not-so-famous, more British than not, from a magazine whose literary standards, despite or because of long periods of arcane collective editorship, are as high as any the genre has ever had to offer, and whose collective taste, if you will, is quite sophisticated.

This is an anthology full of good to excellent and possibly great stories, as good or better as a whole than any of the annual "Year's Best" books. Which may demonstrate, if nothing else, that a selection from fifteen years of a magazine that has always maintained consistently high standards is going to be as good or better than even the best cross-section of what is published in a year across the genre as a whole.

Yet although there isn't a badly written story in the lot, some of them do satisfy better than others and, since there are few dumb ideas here and a high level of literary craftsmanship, it's almost always a matter of the degree to which the story achieves successful closure.

Ian Watson's "Ahead!" is a serious piss-take (and this is not the first time Watson has demonstrated that this is possible) on the notion gaining actual real-world popularity in certain science fictional circles of cryogenically freezing one's head upon death to be revived and reinstalled in a new immortal matrix in the future.

J.G. Ballard's "The Message From Mars" essays a somewhat similar thing with another favorite SF trope, the return of the first expedition to Mars.

Both are written to their authors' usual high standards of craft. Both consist of a series of enigmatically and subtly mordant scenes nicely balanced between deadpan and farce.

But Watson ends his story with a line that snaps off the whole point of the story with a satiric jolt like the crack of a whip, whereas the Ballard leaves the reader muttering "huh?" with just a final unresolved enigma.

"Pigs, Mostly," a fine, interestingly written extrapolation of an extreme version of surrogate parenthood by Ian Lee, with serious intent and real psychological depth, is vitiated at the very end, where the last line is the title of the story.

Not because this can't work, but because *for* it to work, the concluding convergence must bring home a new level of thematic closure. But here it simply tacks on a cutsey-poo ending to what has definitely not been a cutsey-poo story, in the manner of the Kirk-Spock banter just before the final credits on all-too-many seriously intended *Star Trek* episodes. And so it not only falls flat, but breaks tone with what has gone before in a dramatically counterproductive manner.

Garry Kilworth makes a somewhat similar mistake in "The Sculptor," though here it is deeply embedded in the whole story, a well-detailed, thoughtful, and rather strange portrait of an alternate renaissance Italy in which Leonardo da Vinci has become an egomaniacally technocratic dictator and built a kind of Tower of Babel. The story itself follows a kind of action and detection plotline climaxing in an ingenious psychological-artistic ploy, well-suited to carrying the material.

But Kilworth has named his viewpoint character Niccolo, and reveals his last name only at the end as if it is a significant revelation with a line that only does it for the kind of readers who know who Niccolo is as soon they know that the master of the Tower is da Vinci. Leaving those readers—who one would hope are *most* readers—with their intelligence somewhat insulted and those totally ignorant of the most major personages of the place and era scratching their heads in befuddlement.

On the other hand, with Brian Stableford's "The Unkindness of Ravens," a story about the relationship of ravens mutated to sentience with their narrating creator, the title and the fact that the opening explains that an "unkindness" is an obscure collective noun for a group of ravens, leaves you just waiting for a groaner of a pun or the like at the end of an excellent serious study of the nature of the consciousness of these birds.

Instead, Stableford reveals that he has done this to stun you with a last line that without this title would probably come off as mawkish but which with it delivers an epiphany that is unexpectedly emotionally moving.

Not that such one liners are required to deliver such an emotionally and thematically satisfying closure. In "Warmth," the story of a boy's love for his robot nanny, Geoff Ryman pulls it off short of bathos by crystallizing the genuine pathos in a musing about a key artifact. Graham Joyce and Peter F. Hamilton use the traditional means of the minor-key turn-about that focuses the major thematic point in "Eat Reece-bread" and do it with a sentence of pure description.

And so forth.

In the short form, there are as many ways to do it right as to do it wrong. Sometimes the very last line is absolutely critical, sometimes not, but the final paragraph, the closing image, thought, or line of dialog is crucial far more often than not, though not all less than successful closures necessarily completely destroy the story.

And this is one reason why I so seldom review short fiction here, because the better the ending is, the more thematic and emotionally successful a closure it provides, the more damage the critic does to a prospective reader's enjoyment of the story by giving it away, and the more difficult it becomes to say much meaningful about the tale without doing so.

As I have just demonstrated, at least to my own rueful satisfaction.

And, by the way, *The Best of Interzone,* like any "best of" anthology, may by its nature offer a picture skewed toward the rosy, but it seems to me that if the best short stories published in the last few years aren't really better than the best of previous eras, it would seem that even as the overall literary level of science fiction *novels* has declined in terms of how much cynical commercial crap sees print that shouldn't, the overall level of *short* fiction in the genre has improved in the sense that there's much less formula schlock around.

Time was, the magazines, and upon occasion even some of the original anthologies, were sometimes overloaded with action stories following formula pulp plotlines, novelette series written to cobble together as "fix-up novels" later, bits and pieces of novels earning the writers thereof a little more money as awkward storyless "stories."

Now you see very little of that.

There have been complaints of late that the average age of SF readers is rising, and this is generally assumed to be a bad thing, that the stuff just isn't catching them young anymore.

But maybe there's an upside too.

The magazines are mostly no longer trying to cater to adolescent tastes, having lost this audience to TV and CD-ROMs and films and comics and the like, which now certainly offer more pulp SF than even the most voracious kid can eat, plenty of it free on the tube.

And so, maybe by freeing the short story market from the commercial viability of such persiflage, schlocko *media* SF is skewing what gets published toward a more mature and discerning readership and thus improving the literary quality of the short science fiction story.

With novels, of course, it's another matter.

Most if not all of the media SF tie-in novels out there are marketed to sell, unsurprisingly enough, to the very demographic slice that sucks up the aforementioned media SF into which it ties.

This means that they are targeted directly at what once was the readership for pulp SF, greatly expanded by the marketing power of the media conglomerates and the post-literate fact that it is no longer necessary to *read* SF to *consume* SF—adolescents, predominantly male for the science fiction, predominantly female for the fantasy.

This was never the most literarily sophisticated of audiences, but now, thanks to the general decline of reading anything for pleasure by this age group and the availability of so much non-literary SF, it is even less so. Which is why it is drawn to tie-in SF on the one hand, and why tie-in SF is dumbed-down to cater to its level of sophistication on the other.

But for purposes of the current discussion, the point is that tie-in novels by definition are marketing commodities, and they almost always are novel *series* written by diverse hands and not a single author.

And the last thing the corporate powers letting out those work-for-hire contracts want at the end of each episode is closure.

For closure means, at novel length, a conclusion that leaves the main characters psychologically altered, maybe even *dead,* the fictional universe in which they have been operating either changed or seen in a different light by readers, ideally the consciousness of readers somewhat enhanced by a terminal epiphany.

All of which are anathema to editors or producers enforcing the strictures of a series bible.

And this tends to percolate upward into more seriously intended science fiction, in terms of both lowering readers' expectations of true closure to conventional endings in which the good guys win and the bad guys lose, in some kind of climactic combat more often than not, and narrowing editorial concepts of what sort of ending is commercially acceptable, diminishing the literary courage of writers thereby.

This tends to mitigate against the publication and therefore the writing of novels whose conclusions leave the readers' cozy conventional presumptions of what endings should be disturbed instead of pandered to, as real closure should.

It also tends to commercially encourage even first novelists, even excellent first novelists like Kage Baker, to conceive of even that first novel as the opening episode of a series, which here even proclaims itself "a novel of the Company" on the front of a hardcover.

I must admit I was put off reading *In the Garden of Iden* for a long time by that and by the horrendous title until assured by someone who had read it that the book was worth my while. The hanging-pun title turns out to be justified by the fact that the Tudor era garden in which much of the action takes place is that of a character the author has chosen to name "Iden" for the smarmy purpose thereof.

Ugh.

Particularly counterproductive since once past that, and it does take some getting past, what we have here is a very well written and very well researched time travel novel set mostly in pre-Elizabethan England, with a couple of sections in the Spain of the Inquisition.

Mendoza, the protagonist, is rescued from the Inquisition as a young girl by "the Company," aka "Dr. Zeus," to be turned into an immortal cyborg operative. In the future, *our* future that is, immortality has become possible via implants and a series of operations, but only to a very specific phenotype.

A kind of time travel has also been developed. It's possible to go back into the past and return to your starting time, but that's it. It's also not possible to change *known* history, but it is somehow within the rules of this temporal game to change *unknown* history.

So, given Baker's set of arbitrary temporal axioms—and face it, all time travel stories are based on arbitrary temporal axioms—the Company sends crews back in time to turn children of the right phenotype who would otherwise die into immortal cyborg agents, whose missions are not to change history, but to preserve plants, animals, artifacts deemed extinct or lost to *our* evolutionary biology or history by secreting them in isolated venues where Dr. Zeus can rediscover them in our future and become rich and powerful enough thereby to invent immortality and time travel to be able to do this in the first place.

Whatever. It seldom pays to take circular paradoxical time-travel hugger-mugger as anything but a set-up for a story.

Mendoza is trained as a botanist specializing in New World plants, but Dr. Zeus's bureaucracy ends up sending her with a mission to the aforementioned "Garden of Iden" in England to preserve plants in the formidable collection of the quirky proprietor thereof instead.

There Mendoza falls in love with Nicholas, Iden's major domo, and the love story between the immortal cyborg and the despised "mortal" forms the framework upon which Baker constructs an interesting and well-realized physical, social, political, religious, and psychological portrait of the times.

What makes it truly choice is that the Dr. Zeus cyborgs have their own secret hidden culture within all these centuries of history, their own hidden *pop* culture, with material sent back from the future, replete with a company magazine, a company TV news channel with secret cyborg anchors and color commentators giving their take on the events of ongoing history, company soap operas, and a bizarre addiction to twentieth century Hollywood film trivia.

What makes it work as a story is that Nicholas is a man at once intellectually and to a more limited extent psychologically liberated for his time and a religious fanatic extreme even for his time, giving the love story intellectual interest, irony, and emotional poignancy.

What makes the closure work admirably is that Baker faces the inevitable tragic outcome unflinchingly and has the courage to present it to the reader as such.

Unfortunately the novel doesn't end there.

Mendoza, who has undergone a tragically traumatic experience in extremis, is then reassigned to the Aztec era Mexico of her desire, where she is installed in a secret Company resort base that far outdoes anything in present-day Acapulco or Cozumel for grand luxe, and where she speedily enough overcomes her well-justified gloom and voila, is ready for the adventure of the next episode.

What this does, aside from setting up the next novel in the series, is make a protagonist who has been portrayed with some psychological depth as sympathetic throughout seem like a callow cardboard adventure heroine, whose psychic scars are easily enough healed and whose moral qualms are easily enough laid to rest by a choice assignment and a few days luxuriating in a five star resort hotel complex.

It's jarringly at odds with the rest of the novel and nakedly a commercial diktat, much like the aforementioned Kirk-Spock blather at the end of the heavier *Star Trek* episodes, tacked on to lighten things up to leave the audience eager for the next episode.

This has become all too common at novel length, but it's particularly saddening to see it at the end of a novel this good, a fine first novel at that, that would have ended in quite a satisfying and mature closure without it.

Which is not to say that novels that not only defy such conventional commercial endings that trivialize closure or even play *against* such formulaic expectations don't get written and published at all. Robert Silverberg's *The Alien Years* is exemplary.

The title and the simple back cover copy say it all, plotwise:

"THEY CAME.
THEY SAW.
THEY CONQUERED.
WE SURVIVED."

Enigmatic and overpoweringly advanced aliens from somewhere arrive on Earth one fine day. They overpower resistance with a flick of their technological tentacles and conquer the Earth. They are combated by a gallant resistance. Eventually the Earth is liberated and they depart.

Well, there can hardly be a science fictional tale more oft told than this! And what is conventionally more, Silverberg's main characters, the leaders of the resistance, or anyway the resistance that we see, are various members, in one way or another, of the family Carmichael, a clan with a long military tradition, a misfit rebel son who later returns as leader to the righteous fold, and led by an upright upstanding old competent colonel for most of the book's length, the whole thing seemingly straight out of Heinlein.

However . . .

However, this is Silverberg, not Heinlein.

Silverberg's invading "Entities" are not giant bugs in ill-fitting black sombreros. They come in various sizes, shapes, and perhaps levels of sentience, and some of them are rather beautiful. Their motivations remain unknown throughout, perhaps unknowable. Perhaps because the Entities follow some alien esthetic essentially no more knowable to humans than the esthetics of baroque architecture to termites or rock and roll to three-toed tree sloths.

The Entities are for all practical purposes all-powerful. They are virtually unkillable except by a rare human or two, who, by psychological chance, are able to apply a kind of zen indifference to thwart their mind-reading and mind-control abilities. The Carmichaels are as courageous and competent as any doughty Heinleinian might wish, but it does no good. Their clever efforts are thwarted with the alien equivalent of a backhand slap time after time.

The Earth is liberated at the end, all right, but not by any act of man. Indeed the question of *why* the Earth is returned to its original owners is never really answered, any more than humans ever find out why the Entities took it over in the first place. At the fade out, the Entities remain as enigmatically alien as they have been throughout.

Is this an unsatisfying closure? A means by which a writer who didn't know how to end his novel obfuscated his way out of it, the way Stanley Kubrick desperately resorted to symbolist malarkey to fudge his way out of his failure to figure out how to bring credible aliens on camera at the end of *2001?*

In conventional terms, maybe.

But Robert Silverberg has been playing unconventional games with conventional expectations throughout this novel. And at the end, *his own characters* complain that the manner in which "the Alien Years" ended was an unsatisfying historical and psychological closure for them, the Entities and their motivations never understood, the bad guys not being driven off by the gallant resistance but departing of their own mysterious free will, leaving those who should have seen themselves as heroes somehow cheated by a non-victorious "victory."

And this, at least for me, paradoxically enough, brings *The Alien Years* the novel to an esthetically, if not entirely psychologically, satisfying closure.

For this, one is left with the unsettling feeling, is how such interaction with *real* advanced aliens would *really* leave one feeling.

They came, they saw, they conquered.

We survived.

But without really knowing how or why.

Maureen F. McHugh, author of *Mission Child,* has published two previous novels, *China Mountain Zhang* and *Half the Day Is Night. China Mountain Zhang,* a story set mostly in a kind of Sinocized United States, made a splashy debut for McHugh and deservedly so. And admirably enough instead of reusing this unique, detailed, and fictionally successful "universe" in her second novel, *Half the Day Is Night* was set in an entirely different future with entirely different characters having an entirely different psychology—which, folks, is how it is really supposed to be done.

In *Mission Child,* she does it again, going off-planet for the first time, and demonstrating how the three last words of what has been a rather low-key and episodic novel can quietly cast the previous 385 pages in a new perspective without coming across as hokey or excessively flashy.

Indeed, if *Mission Child* has a flaw, it is a decided lack of the flash that McHugh's previous two novels might lead one to expect. The world of *China Mountain Zhang* was a Chinese-dominated future unlike anything else in fiction, the world of *Half the Day Is Night* had undersea cities and a certain amount of technological speculation, but the unnamed planet of *Mission Child* is a backwater colonial planet, much of whose populace has declined into rather primitive tribalism, and whose highest centers of civilized sophistication are cities we would certainly regard as secondary, verging on podunks.

Janna, the protagonist, begins the novel as a female tribeswoman, spends much of it disguised as a male, spends much of it as a kind of medically altered neuter, wandering from here to there, doing fairly menial work most of the time, nor does she accomplish anything world-shaking at the end.

Mission Child is a strange read. For much of the time, it verges on boredom without ever quite tumbling over the edge into it. This is not all that exotic a planet, its cultures range from the primitive tribal to what feels like about 1930s small city urban, and the Earth folks' advanced technology isn't such hot stuff either.

Janna is a rather disconnected and passive protagonist, knocked from here to there by unfortunate circumstance, seeking mainly to survive and earn a living, a peripatetic loner without deep passions, and the story seems to merely meander through this landscape.

What held my interest, at least, what made me like the novel more and more as it went on, was its unusual *realism,* the growing conviction that, yes, this is what a forgotten colony world would *really* be like, this is what would *really* happen when the First Worlders took a modestly renewed interest.

A few second-rate cities. Tribal cultures engaging in low-level warfare. Balances upset by the introduction of more sophisticated weapons technology. A mosaic of different cultures and languages descended from original settling stock of diverse ethnic origins.

And Janna—detribalized by war, country girl in the big city, deracinated wanderer, desexualized, moving from one identity to another in search of what seems like nothing in particular save survival—indeed seems a realistic psychological picture of someone yanked out of a tribal culture by the advent of "modernity" and left to make her way in a planetary mosaic of fractured and diverse cultures she had previously scarcely thought existed.

Not the way a colonial planet is usually done in science fiction, not the usual "heroine" or "hero" of the usual tale of confrontation with off-world "modernity," not a heroine or hero at all, not very flashy. But step by step McHugh builds up the solid conviction that yes, like it or not, this rings true.

Nor is the closure what one would call "powerful," nor am I about to give it away. But suffice it to say that given the nature of the protagonist, her world, and the relationship she has had with it, it is satisfying enough to be called close to perfect, and it certainly makes one finally realize the low-key but profound point that McHugh is making here.

On the other hand, in literal terms, you certainly can't ask for anything more "powerful" than the true closure of Gregory Benford's *Cosm,* it being the explosive death of an entire universe and apparently his protagonist in the process, with perhaps the Earth to follow.

Maybe *too* powerful for the publisher or perhaps even for Benford himself.

Alicia Butterworth is an experimental particle physicist at the University of California at Irvine (where Benford himself is a professor) whose experiment at Brookhaven in Long Island/New York goes unexpectedly wrong.

Or right, depending on your point of view.

Using the Brookhaven collider to slam together atoms of uranium 238 in hopes of producing a new particle predicted by theory, she instead wrecks her apparatus by unexpectedly producing a fairly small dense silvery sphere that turns out to be something like the three-dimensional end in our universe of a four-dimensional wormhole into another universe *created* by the experiment.

Although in our universe, this artifact weights only kilos and can therefore be spirited back to her lab in Irvine by Butterworth against the rules of the scientific game, the universe "inside" it is a full-scale one, albeit running at not only a greater time speed than ours, but a speed whose rate is accelerating.

A full explication of the physics I leave to Benford, and he does deliver it admirably, particularly after Butterworth enlists the aid of theoretical physicist Max Jalon.

Needless to say, Brookhaven is royally pissed off when they learn that Alicia has purloined the sphere created on *their* apparatus, and seek to get it back by legal and political means while attempting to replicate her experiment themselves, finally producing a much bigger sphere.

Cosm is in a way four stories, three of them more believable than the fourth.

There is a scientific mystery, Alicia and Max's efforts to understand the nature of the sphere that Alicia dubs the "Cosm" when she realizes that there's a universe "inside," of which she is quite literally the creative deity, and what will happen as it expands, evolves, then collapses into a terminal singularity (as the physics here has the fate of universes in general, although recently this seems to have been opened to scientific question).

No one does this better than Benford—indeed, no one does it as well, explaining truly arcane physics in the process of making the doing of the science itself as dramatically gripping as the action line of any thriller.

Nor does anyone do the inner politics of science as well as Benford, beside whom C.P. Snow is a naïf. Indeed one suspects that he just may be settling a few scores himself here.

The love story between Alicia and Max is very well done indeed, her happening to be black and he white being rendered quite convincingly as trivial beside the fact of them both being physicists, albeit one experimental and the other theoretical, and therefore coming from two different cultures. The way Benford builds their relationship slowly and delicately as it builds itself likewise from the intellectual to the amorous is admirable indeed.

Three out of four ain't bad.

The above, by my lights, was plenty of thematic and characterological material for a novel, but Benford felt compelled somehow to throw in an action thread.

This involves, among other things that seem out of keeping with the level of the rest of the novel, actions on the part of Alicia that seem out of place in the realistically described scientific world in which she operates, and a certain amount of, well, idiot plotting in which intelligent people do stupid things to create plot complications.

It also involves the kidnapping of Alicia and her intrepid escape, leading ultimately to a climactic chase through the desert with the Cosm shrinking toward an explosive implosion at the end of which—

Well, without giving away the ending it's hard to talk about it, but suffice it to say that it does bring all the threads together into a moment of literarily successful closure, even the physical jeopardy hugger-mugger that the novel could well do without.

And impressively enough, it appears to be a tragic one, for Alicia, perhaps for the Earth itself—

And then—

And then Benford appends an epilogue that he forthrightly calls "Epilogue" in the form of a series of headlines, in which, either by his own free will or under editorial fiat, he reveals that no, despite fictional appearances, it all worked out okay, and they got married, and lived happily ever after.

Literally.

You pays your money, and you takes your choice.

I can imagine Benford and/or his editor reading the true ending of *Cosm* and, well, chickening out.

Commercially speaking, you just can't *do* that! I can hear the editor tell the author and/or the author telling himself.

Me, I say this is commercially correct spinach, and I say the hell with it.

In *Frenzetta,* Richard Calder seems to bite much the same bullet that Benford nervously spat out, though these days you can't be sure it's *really* over even *after* the Fat Lady sings, as Frank Herbert discovered to his enrichment after trying to end the *Dune* saga by terminating the messianic hero thereof.

Still . . .

Richard Calder keeps growing and growing. He began, like William Gibson, with a knockout first novel, *Dead Girls,* and then, like Gibson, followed it with a sequel, *Dead Boys.*

Well, a "sequel" of sorts. *Dead Boys* sort of follows some of the same characters as *Dead Girls* and in certain aspects could be said to be set in the same "universe," but since the identities of the characters, and indeed the multiplexity of universes in which they operate, keeps mutating, along with Calder's style, this is not exactly a straightforward follow-through on *Dead Girls* as *Count Zero* was to *Neuromancer.*

As Gibson mined the *Neuromancer* universe for one more novel, *Mona Lisa Overdrive,* to make a trilogy, Calder wrote one more *Dead* book, *Dead Things,* to do likewise, at which point it seemed he might be going down the path of too many early successes in the genre, becoming trapped in a familiar set of tropes, a copyrighted fictional universe, from which, the more commercially successful it becomes, the harder it is to escape.

But Calder's fourth novel, *Cythera,* was set in an entirely different fictional universe, with a different set of characters, and entirely different rules.

Well, sort of.

Frenzetta (and no, the unfortunate title has nothing to do with Frank Frazetta, but is the name of the female protagonist) is once again set in a fictional universe unlike anything Calder—or for that matter anyone else—has given us before.

Here we have a richly baroque and decadent future Earth mutated into a complexity and strangeness that I could not begin to describe here, but which Calder renders admirably, fully, and deeply, in a prose style that has matured from the sometimes out of control Burroughsesque semi-hebephrenia of *Dead Boys*—and to an increasingly lesser extent *Dead Things* and *Cythera*—into an instrument no less richly powerful but now well under control.

But once again, Calder returns to what after five novels can now in retrospect be seen as his major theme, perhaps his obsession—the obsessive love or lust or neurotic fixation or all three, doomed in one way or another more often than not, between a male and a female, not merely of two different sentient "species" of "humanity," not merely of two different psychic realities, but in one way or another possessed by or the prisoners of two different metaphysical systems.

In the future Earth of *Frenzetta,* humanity, or large demographic portions thereof, has been infiltrated, taken over psychically, possessed by, refugee entities from another destroyed dimension with diverse and decidedly perverse sexual needs by previous human standards, and much of the human race has diversified into human-animal chimeras along the lines of these sexual needs and proclivities.

Or something like that. This is a *very* complex set of cultural and psychic realities, nor does Calder exactly opt for simplistic transparency in the rendering thereof.

Here the lovers, or perhaps better would-be lovers, are the Frenzetta of the title, a ratgirl whose nature dooms her (if that is the word) to death in ecstasy, "black orgasm," the first time she experiences sexual fulfillment, for that is how ratgirls reproduce; and Duane, a kind of cyborged re-animated corpse with the power of astral projection, but penile equipment permanently unavailable as functional meatware.

As in much of Calder, this is a match made in both heaven and hell. Frenzetta, as is her ratgirl nature, lives in a state of perpetual self-frustrated heat, knowing that the first time she comes she dies, but, as is her nature, drawn to that black orgasm. Duane lusts to fuck her, yet not to lose her to death thereby, but is in any case physically incapable.

So she's got the ultimate safe male companion and he's got a woman who can only remain alive by accepting their endless foreplay as all that they can have. They love each other. But they cannot experience sexual fulfillment. Which, if they could, would mean her death.

By now, it's obvious that this is Richard Calder's major theme, or at least it has been so far. In the *Dead* trilogy, it was mostly one-way sexual obsession, and largely devoid of what could really be called love.

In *Cythera,* though, it was mutual, and the star-and-reality-crossed lovers sought apotheosis in the mythical third reality of the title where creatures of two divergent realities could unite in a third.

In *Frenzetta,* thematically speaking, it's much the same thing, with the ultima Thule of Duane and Frenzetta being the possibly mythical lost Cathay on the Moon.

It's not giving away too much to say they arrive at their thematic destination. Sort of. Nor is it giving too much away to say that the apotheosis they find there has little to do with the hearts and flowers of a romantic ending— not unless you are a ratgirl and a re-animated corpse—and everything to do with the thematic, sexual, psychic, and metaphysical logic that has led up to this closure.

A closure that does not seem to leave much wriggle room left to segue into a sequel.

Which, perhaps, makes a point about not just the literary difference between true closure and a mere "ending," happy or otherwise, but also between the commercially commanded tendency for so many SF writers to set multiple works in the same fictional universe and the internal psychic impulses that impel a writer like Richard Calder to follow the same thematic obsession through multiple fictional universes.

The novel series whose common thread is a consistent setting and/or cast of characters tends by its very nature to mitigate against true closure at the "end" of any one novel, for the "end" of any one of them must also serve as an entrée into the next, which makes it difficult to bring down a truly final dramatic curtain with real existential weight.

But a skein of novels like Richard Calder's, whose common thread is a passionate thematic obsession of which the writer himself may not entirely be in control, can take readers on any number of self-contained voyages to its psychic heartland without ever revisiting the same characters, the same setting, or even the same metaphysical rules, and reach a closure expressing the existential essence thereof each time out.

And indeed, Calder's clarity seems to have grown, his dramatic structures become more coherent, his character relationships more humanly poignant. Even his control of his prose seems to have improved in the two totally free-standing novels beyond the *Dead* trilogy.

Of course for the same passionate thematic obsession to carry readers through several novels built around its exploration, it must be of sufficient weight, centrality, complexity, and power to hold their interest through multiple iterations.

The tension between sexual desire and its fulfillment, between requited love and unrequited lust or vice versa, between lovers or would-be lovers who do not quite inhabit the same realities, and ultimately the metaphysical relationship between sex and death, would seem to suffice.

No doubt even such a theme will pale on readers if the writer mines it for *too* long, if he runs out of meaningful variations, but this is a wide and deep one, and Richard Calder seems a long way from running out of permutations.

Frenzetta certainly demonstrates that he hasn't reached the end of the vein yet, and given his track record so far, there is reason to hope that he will reach the true closure of this grand theme before he does. ○

Please don't force me down into that awful sonata! The other notes clash with me and, frankly, I feel ugly.
3-4-99
Joe Mayhew '99

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10-12—**CopperCon. (602) 973-2341. (E-mail) cucon@casfs.org.** Holiday Inn Sunspree, Phoenix AZ. D. Weber, Brett Bass.

10-13—**Breakaway Con. hungabunga@earthlink.net.** Radisson, Los Angeles CA. M. Landau, B. Bain. Space:1999.

11-25—**Oregon Coast Professional Fiction Writers' Workshop. (541) 996-8211.** Rusch, D. W. Smith, Oltion, Ordover.

14-15—**SF & Organization, c/o M. Higgins, Mgt. Centre, U. of Leicester LE1 7RH, UK. (+44-116) 252-5644.** Academic con.

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23-26—**Death Equinoxe, Box 581, Denver CO 80201. jsailing@netonecom.net.** Ramada Downtown. E. Hand, Clute.

24-26—**Nan Desu Kon, 1552 Monroe, Denver CO 80206. genkidenki@hotmail.com.** Sheraton, Lakewood CO. Anime.

24-26—**StarCon, Box 24955, Denver CO 80224. (303) 757-5850.** Holiday Inn. Media. Lots of action in Denver this week.

25-26—**HypothetiCon, 11 Cleghorn #O/2, Glasgow G22 5RN, UK. hypotheticon1999@hotmail.com.** Central Hotel.

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NEXT ISSUE

DECEMBER COVER STORY

Our December cover story is by multiple Hugo and Nebula Award-winner **Mike Resnick**, who takes us "Hunting the Snark" on a distant and mysterious alien planet, in a vivid, suspenseful, and action-packed novella that reminds us that when you go a-hunting, you can't always be sure just who is hunting whom. If you have a pulse, you're going to find that this one sets it racing, so don't miss it! The evocative cover is by **Nicholas Jainschigg**.

There's another big novella in the December issue, this one by Hugo-winner **Harry Turtledove**, the King of Alternate History, author of *The Guns of the South* and the bestselling Worldwar series. Harry returns to our pages with a clever, highly inventive, and entertaining novella that's part of an experiment in fiction that we're running in conjunction with our sister magazine, *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*. Both *Asimov's* and *Analog* are running novellas by Harry in our December issues, and the two stories, although each one is complete in itself and able to be read as an independent piece of fiction, are mirror-images of each other, the same story seen through the same character's eyes, but from two radically different perspectives in time (as you might suspect, time-travel is involved . . .), a change in perspective that changes everything else about the story as well—so that to appreciate the whole story, and the nuances of everything that happens, you need to read both mirror-images, in both magazines. The December issue of *Asimov's* will contain Turtledove's "Forty, Counting Down"—which will be complemented in the December *Analog* by Harry's "Twenty-one, Counting Up." You'll want to check out both mirror-twin halves of this fascinating experiment in fictional perspective, especially as both halves deliver plenty of excitement, intricate plot-twists, and surprises!

And, just in case you think we forgot that the December issue is traditionally our Holiday Issue, we'll put you in a festive mood, sort of, by bringing you a special Holiday Poem by **Geoffrey A. Landis**, "Christmas (After We All Get Time Machines)."

TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Acclaimed British author **Ian R. MacLeod**, whose distinguished novella "The Summer Isles," from last year's October/November issue, is on the Final Hugo Ballot, takes us back to the desperate and dangerous days of World War II for the bittersweet and evocative story of "The Chop Girl"; new writer **Alastair Reynolds** takes a chilling and ingenious look at the high-tech future of the prison system, in "Viper"; the madcap King of Gonzo, **Eliot Fintushel**, returns to show us just how far some hopefuls might travel to audition at the local comedy club, in the very funny "Open Mike"; and new writer **Daniel Abraham**, making his *Asimov's* debut, takes us to a future troubled with new and different sorts of racism for a compelling tale of identity and prejudice, transgression and forgiveness, in the hard-hitting "Jaycee."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column examines "The Great Tradition"; **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; and **James Patrick Kelly** takes a look at online "Comics" in his "On the Net" column; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our December issue on sale on your newsstand on October 19, 1999, or subscribe today (you can subscribe online at our *Asimov's* website, *http://www.asimovs.com*), and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you NEXT year!

COMING SOON

great new stories by **Ursula K. Le Guin, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, William Barton, Jane Yolen, Brian Stableford, Esther M. Friesner, Stephen Baxter, Kage Baker, L. Timmel Duchamp, G. David Nordley, Tom Purdom, Michael Swanwick, Eileen Gunn, Pat Murphy, Andy Duncan, Eliot Fintushel**, and many others.

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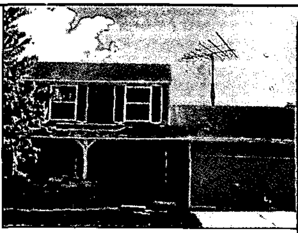
H1759

TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

Stealth antenna hides under gutters but performs like big ugly antennas

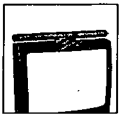
The new Max Antenna by GE is the low-profile, high-gain way to get flawless reception of broadcast signals without expensive installation.

by Hope Chapman



The best antenna you'll never see.

Would you rather have the "old-fashioned" unsightly antenna tower or get even better reception with one that you can mount horizontally or vertically.



The Max Antenna by GE is the ultimate TV antenna system.

Electronic engineers agree—your television is only as good as the signal it receives. Both cable and satellite television systems have spent a great deal to improve the quality of their transmission, but they can be extremely expensive, they aren't available in all areas and may not provide access to local TV stations. Luckily, there is a new antenna from GE that will provide breakthrough performance without making your family room look like something out of the fifties.

Clear alternative. The Max Antenna series from GE uses a revolutionary electromagnetic design to maximize installation flexibility and yield longer range reception of off-air VHF and UHF signals. Unlike a conventional dipole antenna, the Max Antenna can receive signals in both vertical and horizontal planes with minimum cross-polarization loss. This design allows for the first low-profile antenna solution that provides numerous installation options.

Superior components. The key to the superiority of this antenna is its ingenious use of the latest electromagnetic technology—providing high gain and full channel coverage as well as the greatest amount of mounting flexibility. First, the antennas were designed around a wide band element to achieve the greatest amount of gain in a relatively small space. Next, an amplifier and matching network was designed to enhance the reception of weak signals. This amplifier also adds very little distortion to the strong signals, giving it a balanced amount of gain. A filter on the amplifier board will allow for good matching between the antenna and amplifier. Special attention was paid to design an antenna-amplifier combination that would be completely compatible with the new digital transmission format. It has been designed for strong signal distortion rejection and a low amount of noise. It is omnidirectional and requires no adjustments, orienting or fine tuning during use. You simply install it, set it and forget it.

Risk-free reception. The Max Antenna comes with Comtrad's exclusive risk-free home trial. If you are not completely satisfied, return it within 90 days for a full "No Questions Asked" refund.

Max Indoor/Outdoor Antenna 20-mile range	**$49.95**	$7.95 S&H
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